

MY HAPPY MARRIAGE

AKUMI AGITOGI

5





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Akumi Agitogi

Illustration by
Tsukiho Tsukioka



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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE 5

AKUMI AGITOGI

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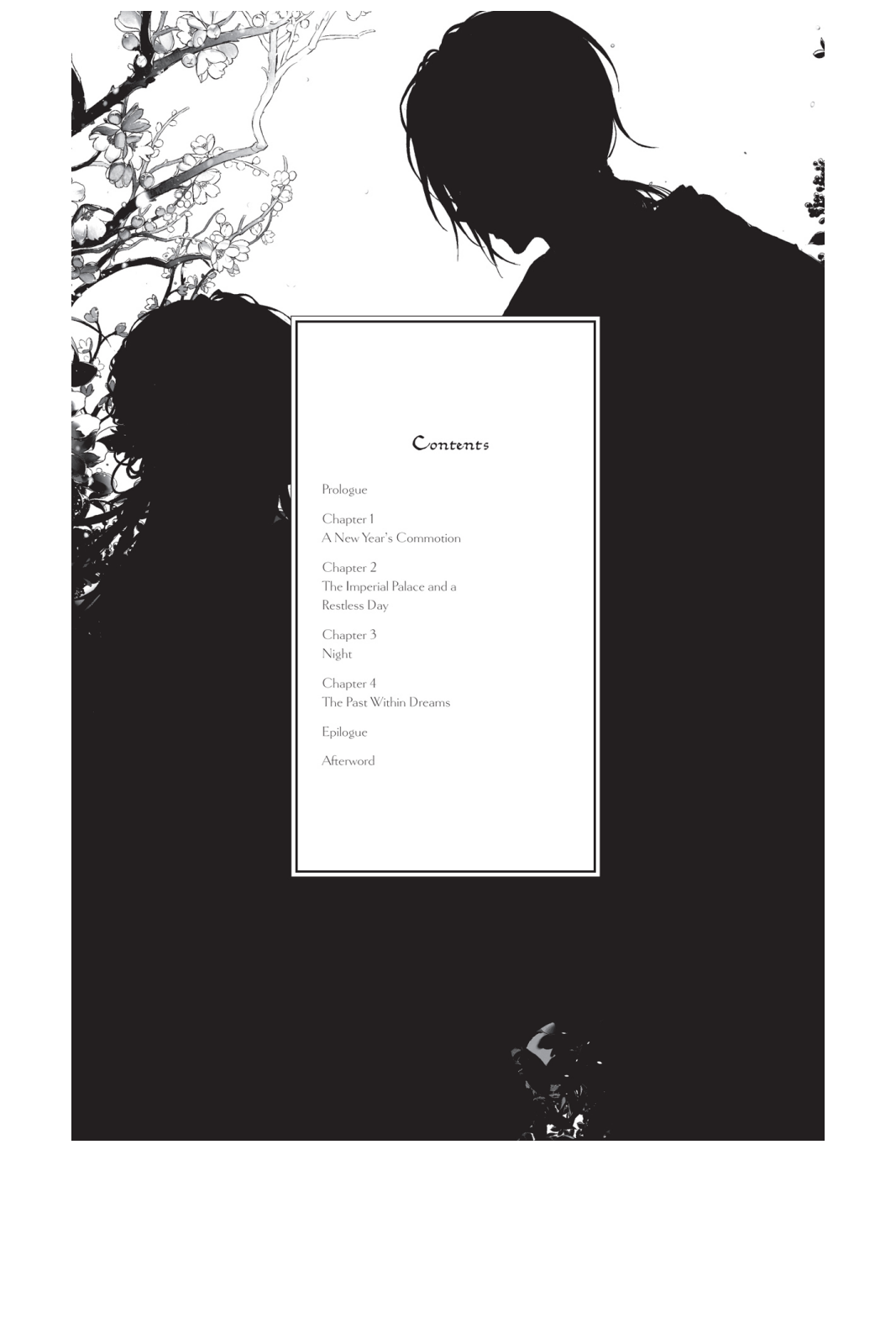
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MY HAPPY MARRIAGE
CHARACTERS

KIYOKA KUDOU

Head of the distinguished Kudou family.
Commander of the Imperial Army's
Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.
The greatest Gift-user of his era.

MIYO SAIMORI

Eldest daughter of the
Saimori family.
Lost her mother at a young age.
Was raised under the thumb of her
abusive stepmother and stepsister.

YURIE

Servant of the Kudou family.

YOSHITO GODOU

Member of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.
Kiyoka's loyal subordinate.

HAZUKI KUDOU

Kiyoka's older sister. Mother of one.

KAZUSHI TATSUISHI

Head of the Tatsuishi family.
Prodigy of the dispelling arts.

ARATA USUBA

Miyo's first cousin. Son to the head of the Usuba family.

MASASHI OOKAITO

Major General in the Imperial Army's
General Staff Office.

TAKAIHITO

Crown Prince. Possesses the power of
Divine Revelation.

KAORUKO JINNOUCHI

Kiyoka's subordinate and former marriage candidate.

SUMI SAIMORI

Miyo's mother. Deceased.

NAOSHI USUI

Founder of the Gifted Communion.
Sumi's former marriage candidate.

 PROLOGUE

It was the night of New Year's Eve.

The sun had already dipped below the horizon, enveloping the land in a frigid twilight so still that it smothered all signs of life.

Crown Prince Takaihito peered out of the open paper screen window and gazed at the hazy outline of the withered courtyard against the darkness. Then he heard a voice from behind.

"Are you absolutely sure about this?"

The man who had asked the question was Masahi Ookaito, a key figure in the military with a strong relationship to Takaihito.

In that dim and dreary room was also a third figure, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, who served as an aide to the emperor in governmental matters.

A man named Takakura had assumed the position when Takaihito began to take control of the government in the emperor's stead.

Though young, the current Lord Keeper was one of the few people to have earned the crown prince's trust, owing to his sharp, flexible mind. It helped that the two men were both in their early thirties.

Takaihito nodded softly in response to Ookaito's question without turning to face him.

The Imperial Palace's great purification ritual had wrapped up earlier that evening, and almost everyone had left to prepare for the busy days ahead.

This included two of the emperor's other assistants, the Grand Chamberlain and Minister of the Imperial Household. Now it was just the three of them.

"I'm certain of it, yes. The people are not to be informed of His Majesty the emperor's disappearance. We should also avoid fully mobilizing the military in the search, lest someone catch on... Regardless, we won't be finding His Majesty tonight. In the meantime, it's vital that everyone rest for what's ahead. There won't be any time

to slow down once New Year arrives.”

The Gifted Communion’s abduction of the emperor had plunged the government into crisis. However, Takaihito was intentionally obscuring the grave truth from the citizenry.

Whenever he closed his eyes, he would see a vision from beyond the present. A scene of strife in the wintry imperial capital so vivid that he could nearly hear the people’s screams. It wouldn’t be long before his vision became reality.

Takaihito could only see a few possible futures, and the paths that led to these fates were obscured to him. Yet this time, he could feel it in his bones. The future he glimpsed was an unavoidable torrent.

With that in mind, the best course of action was to avoid any uproar and gather strength in preparation for the tidal wave to come.

Just then, a cold gust of wind picked up, lifting the last few leaves on the ground into the air and blowing through the window.

Feeling a shudder coming on, Takaihito shut the paper screen.

“The emperor is unharmed, yes?” Takakura asked, as if to make extra sure of the fact.

“Yes, quite unharmed. The Gifted Communion would not go through the effort of abducting him simply to take his life,” Takaihito answered before sitting himself down on a floor cushion. “Personally, I would have been fine with His Majesty leaving this world entirely, but—”

“What are you saying...? That’s going too far,” Ookaito interjected with a hint of reproachment in his voice upon hearing Takaihito’s unguarded, self-deprecating thoughts. Takakura was at a loss for words.

The crown prince raised the corners of his lips slightly at the candid responses of his vassals.

He was the ruler of the country, the steward of the people’s welfare; that was all the more reason to wish for his own father’s death. Still, even Takaihito was taken aback at the coldness of his words now that Ookaito had pointed it out.

His Majesty was all but dead yet retained the authority of his title, while his successor exercised true power in an unofficial capacity. It was all too clear that their simultaneous existence would only lead to strife.

Everything would have been so much simpler to handle if the Gifted Communion had killed the emperor outright.

Indeed, thoughts like these would make me seem quite inhuman, would they not?

The citizens revered Takaihito’s family for the divine blood that ran through their veins. *Surely that explains my coldheartedness*, he thought with a mixture of humor and irony.

“Now then, you two. Have you made progress on your ends?”

“I’d like to say things have gone off without a hitch...but they aren’t looking good. There are many dissenting voices in the military, so I think we’ll have a difficult road ahead.”

“The same goes on my end as well. There’s been a lot of pushback from politicians and bureaucrats, including the Minister of the Imperial Household.”

“I’m not surprised. However, as this is the most efficient option available, I would like you to move ahead with it in some manner.”

“I will do my utmost.”

“As you wish.”

“Please hurry as much as you can.”

Watching both Ookaito and Takakura leave with a reverential bow, Takaihiro leisurely rested his cheek in his hand.

His power of Divine Revelation was still incomplete.

Its full workings were unknown, but he did know that he wouldn’t be able to obtain the full Gift of Divine Revelation until he officially ascended the throne and was recognized by the gods...or so he’d been told.

Like the crown princes who had come before him, Takaihiro prophesized unstable futures. At times, he would see glimpses of the far future, while at others, he would be shown a vision a few seconds ahead in time. He could not control which futures he saw.

Just the other day, in fact, the deficiencies of his abilities had backfired. The resulting confusion in the field had nearly caused Miyo Saimori to be captured by the Gifted Communion.

Panicking about his powers would get him nowhere, yet that didn’t change the fact he needed to surmise what was to come from what fragments of the future he could see, and develop countermeasures against any unsavory outcomes.

“...Is this truly the right path to go down?”

He could see several of the pieces that would need to be in place to achieve the future he desired. Yet there were still some that were missing, and he was always scrambling for more.

The question was would his latest plan be for good or ill?

For all of his connections with the divine, Takaihiro could only rack his brain over the matter, just like any other ordinary person.

 CHAPTER 1
A New Year's Commotion

She exited the house, and the cold air hit her cheeks like daggers.

The trees around the front entryway were covered in a thin layer of snow, and the world beyond that was dyed a faint white.

Miyo Saimori took in the silvery landscape for a few moments, her hands still resting on the sliding door.

“It’s so pretty...”

This was the first time she had ever felt this way about snow.

In winters past, the snow had heralded not only cooler temperatures, but also the back pain that came with shoveling it. She didn’t have the luxury of appreciating the winter scenery.

She felt profound happiness in moments like these, where she could simply drink in the beauty of nature.

“It sure has gotten colder.”

Miyo had been so enraptured by the scenery that she gasped when she heard a voice from behind her.

Despite the cold nipping at her skin, her cheeks instantly flushed with heat.

“Y-yes, it has...,” she replied awkwardly, too bashful to turn around. Kiyoka Kudou walked past his fiancée to step out the front door.

It was New Year’s Day. The old year had given way for the new, but a bit too much time had passed to call it “morning.”

The pair were just about to leave for the traditional first shrine visit of the New Year.

Kiyoka was wearing an indigo kimono underneath a western-style gray coat, and his handsome features were not outdone in the slightest by the beautiful scenery around them. His striking looks still took her aback.

Miyo wore a subdued light yellow *haori* coat over a white kimono, finely patterned with a multicolored fan design, together with a scarf and gloves to protect from the cold.

She wasn't used to wearing such flashy outfits; coupled with the events of last night, Miyo felt like she would run away and hide any moment now.

I mean, how couldn't I...?

She had been taken by surprise the last time. But the night before was different.

Miyo had wished for it herself and allowed it to happen—a kiss.

Just because it hadn't been her first time didn't mean she was used to it. If anything, the experience filled her with so much shame that she could no longer look Kiyoka in the eye.

Though she knew it was unreasonable, she couldn't help but stare at him from behind with a twinge of resentment.

...Why are you able to remain so calm and composed, Kiyoka?

Were kisses not anything special to him?

It was true that she would be twenty this year, and he would be twenty-eight. While Miyo was quite a bit late to be getting married herself, the same could be said for him, too.

It would be completely understandable for a man of Kiyoka's age to be experienced.

There hadn't been anything between him and Kaoruko Jinnouchi, a previous marriage candidate of his. But now Miyo knew for sure that he didn't completely disdain women to the point of discomfort.

So that means...he has really done those sorts of shameful...

The mere thought of it made her lose her composure. Blood rushed to her cheeks, turning them beet red.

It made sense. How else could he have remained so composed, as brief as their kiss was, if he wasn't already accustomed to such activities?

While she, on the other hand, was utterly embarrassed.

All too aware of the blush on her face, Miyo covered her cheeks with both of her hands, which were wrapped in wool gloves.

If she didn't cover them up, she'd be seen as the sort of strange-minded woman who made herself turn bright red by indulging in salacious fantasies.

"Miyo."

"...Yes?"

"What are you doing? Let's go."

Kiyoka turned to her and held out his hand, his expression completely cool and unperturbed.

Miyo concealed her embarrassment and drew in obediently toward him, drooping her head and pouting slightly.

But for some reason, this behavior seemed to displease him.

Kiyoka furled his eyebrows and grabbed Miyo by the hand to pull her even closer.

“You’ll trip if you walk along with your head in the clouds.”

“S-sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, just watch your step. It’s slippery with all this snow out.”

“Okay.”

Then he slowly started walking, her hand still in his.

Thank goodness she had gloves on right now. Otherwise, he might have caught on to her heightened body temperature.

Miyo and Kiyoka walked along, the white winter scenery flowing past them.

The shrine they were heading to for New Year’s was in a slightly removed location, closer to their home than the center of the capital.

On any other year, they would have gone to the shrine in the old capital that the Kudou family had been attending for generations. But honoring those traditions would be impossible this year.

For the threat posed by Naoshi Usui and the Gifted Communion was too great.

It wasn’t just that they were targeting Miyo for her Dream Sight—they had also kidnapped the emperor.

The citizens of the Empire were ringing in the New Year and enjoying the holiday, blissfully ignorant that their ruler had disappeared from the imperial throne.

...It’s all thanks to Takaihito that I’m able to spend New Year’s with Kiyoka like this, too.

The heat in her face gradually cooling, Miyo calmed her pounding heart as she stared at her and Kiyoka’s linked hands.

Her memories of Usui’s attack on the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station toward the end of the year were still fresh in her mind.

In hindsight, the assault was a feint for the Gifted Communion to abscond the emperor from the Imperial Palace, where he been virtually imprisoned within its walls.

Normally, the abduction of an emperor would have been an unprecedented national crisis. It would have been practically impossible to spend the day in peace like this. Instead, the ensuing uproar would have turned the entire country upside down, with citizens being roped into searching for the emperor alongside military personnel like Kiyoka.

However, Takaihito had issued a strict gag order on anything to do with the emperor’s abduction.

Divulging any information, even to those involved in the government, was strictly forbidden, and he’d notified everyone in the

know that there would be severe consequences for breaking his decree. While Miyo was a regular civilian, this also applied to her.

The general populace could not be informed under any circumstance. This was Takaihito's decision.

Although select military personnel had been mobilized during December to conduct a secret search for the emperor, the operation was largely dropped at the end of the year, and they, too, were given an ample amount of year's end vacation.

"Um, Kiyoka."

"What is it?"

"...Um, are you sure it's okay to be so relaxed right now?" Miyo murmured, and Kiyoka quietly gazed down at her while continuing to walk on. His pale eyes were extremely serene.

"I can't imagine it's not when Takaihito permitted it."

"Even with His Majesty's situation?"

"Yes. If the emperor's safety was in true danger, then Prince Takaihito would be able to ascertain it with his Divine Revelation. Nor would he be one to ignore that, either."

From Miyo's standpoint, the emperor was essentially her adversary.

If he hadn't meddled with the Usuba family while her mother Sumi Saimori was still alive, Miyo's hardships wouldn't have been half as difficult. She could have lived a life without suffering.

Though she very well may not have been born if that had happened.

In any case, while Miyo didn't revere the emperor, she didn't feel any strong resentment toward him, either, since they had never met.

What she did find painful, however, was having to act like she didn't know that the emperor had been abducted.

...No, that's not quite right.

Miyo let out a sigh.

The truth was, she knew what was really going on. She was simply trying to search for an excuse to avoid confronting her feelings.

Miyo looked at her fiancé, whose hand she was still holding, from a slight angle, watching his long ponytail sway across his spine.

Back when Usui had raided the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit...an emotion had clearly welled in her heart. The same feeling as that warm sensation she'd experienced last night when they exchanged their kiss.

It felt like she wouldn't know how to handle herself if she ever grew conscious of this emotion's true form, so she continued to avoid exploring it too deeply.

"Miyo."

"Y-yes?!"

Her fiancé's address startled her, and a strange voice escaped her lips. Her cheeks, which had cooled at last, now heated up again for an

entirely different reason.

“Ahh...should I comment on that just now?”

Kiyoka's exasperated tone made her even more ashamed.

“No, um, please, please don't say anything.”

She couldn't be walking around with her head in the clouds, focusing on these embarrassing thoughts. Miyo strictly admonished herself.

“In that case, perhaps it's better if I don't press any further about your odd behavior this morning.”

“K-Kiyoka...”

He had seen through everything, just like he always did. Including the reason why her expression had been oscillating between elation and depression.

As Miyo stood there too shocked to speak, Kiyoka let out a sigh of resignation and grinned.

“Well, I don't mind if you don't want to answer me. It looks like today isn't the day.”

“.....”

At this point, she could only fall silent.

That was Kiyoka's way of telling her that he would overlook things for now, but she would eventually have to confront her feelings.

I...

Miyo never thought that the day would come when she'd face a question like this.

At first, just the notion of fleeing the Saimoris was enough for her. Being able to live a tranquil life on top of that would have been the greatest blessing of all.

And yet, she hadn't been able to imagine that there was greater happiness—far more than she deserved—beyond that. There shouldn't have been anything past her reach.

She wasn't sure what to do anymore.

Things still slightly awkward between them, Miyo and Kiyoka slowly passed through quiet farmland roads before finally approaching the edge of the capital.

The city outskirts had been tranquil, but predictably, they ran into a large number of people also going to visit shrines once they entered the capital.

Everyone was clad in luxurious kimonos for the holiday, smiling as their white breath rose into the air.

They squeezed each other by the hand and joined the flow of people.

“Miyo.”

“Yes?”

“Now that I think about it... What did you do for New Year’s before this?”

As soon as those words left his mouth, he realized his faux pas and tacked on a “never mind” with a conflicted grimace. Miyo couldn’t help but smile.

At that side of him.

The kindness behind his clumsiness, which made her want to be with him.

“It’s okay. Strangely, I don’t find it as hard to think back to those times anymore.”

“Really?”

“Yes, truly... I was always left behind to look after the manor at New Year’s. Almost all the servants would go home for the holiday, and my family—”

Suddenly, images of her father, stepmother, and stepsister appeared in the back of her mind. Yet surprisingly, she found that acknowledging them as her family only left a bitter taste in her mouth instead of sending her spiraling.

Miyo hadn’t been fond of New Year’s.

Everyone at the Saimori estate would be preoccupied with doing New Year’s greetings, so things weren’t as difficult as they normally were for the first three days of the year. But once that period had passed, her stepmother and stepsister would treat her much more harshly than normal, as though they were letting out the pent-up anger from their rounds of greetings.

The few servants who remained in the house while the Saimoris were out would treat Miyo kindly, and they would even give her some of their traditional New Year’s meal. However, just thinking about the pain that would await her afterward left her with only negative feelings toward the season.

She didn’t need any special treatment just because those three were gone. Things would have been better if New Year’s never happened at all. With these thoughts in her heart, she would spend the whole time holed up in her room.

“My family was always out doing their New Year’s greetings, while I stayed behind at the estate to attend to my usual duties. The holiday always passed by in the blink of an eye.”

She felt the warmth of Kiyoka’s large hand and reassured herself. She smiled the best she could.

Hesitant to bare the honest feelings she held at the time to her kind fiancé, she’d ended up giving him a rather brief and straightforward answer.

But that was all right with her. Kiyoka didn’t need to know of the ugly emotions she’d experienced in the past, which seemed liable to

drag her down into a pitch-black mire.

How could she talk about sadness when he had given Miyo this warmth of his and a light bright enough to banish all of the grime and sludge within her? He listened to what she had to say with sincerity, so she didn't need to go out of the way to say something that would cause him pain.

"Oh. So does that mean you've never gone for a New Year's shrine visit?"

"I don't have any memories of doing so, but I think my mother likely brought me along when she was still alive. But, after that...I would pray with Hana at our estate's home altar. Once she left my family's employment, I continued doing it by myself."

Her family's estate had a home shrine in the parlor, which she would use only when her family was away from home or on an outing. That had been the only place she ever prayed to the gods.

Kiyoka scowled, a look of deep displeasure on his face.

"Honestly, I question if you can even call that a New Year's shrine visit."

"...Indeed. Now that I think about it, you're right..."

The Kudou family's origins traced back to court nobles in the old capital who were often involved with Shinto rituals, which made Miyo feel only more ashamed.

"It's fine, I guess. From this year forward, you'll be able to properly pay your respects at a shrine. Make sure you pray enough to make up for all the years you missed, okay? Look—there it is."

She followed Kiyoka's gaze and laid eyes on a large shrine.

The massive roof and straw *shimenawa* rope of the structure were particularly striking. The stone-paved road that led them from the torii gate was packed with people who had formed a line leading up to the offering box.

This shrine was by no means the largest in the city, and there were others that held events and rituals that were much more representative of the capital. The fact that so many people were here despite that was an amazing thing indeed.

"Wow...!"

"Don't get lost now."

They got in the line of worshippers and waited for their turn as they listened to the clamor of the large crowd.

Miyo wasn't sure how long they waited, but eventually, their turn arrived. She took some coins out of her purse and threw them into the offering box.

After Kiyoka threw his offering in the box, she bowed in tandem with him and then clapped her hands together twice. Although she knew the ritual in theory, she still felt nervous about being unfamiliar

with the etiquette for worship as she brought her hands together and spoke to the god of the shrine.

What am I supposed to do from here?

Of course, the deity gave her no reply.

Nevertheless, she couldn't stop herself from talking to them.

I want to be together with Kiyoka. Is that alone not enough?

"Love" came in many forms. Friendship, affection, familial love. So what were the feelings she had for Kiyoka?

She wanted to learn more about him and grew jealous when other women approached him. She yearned to be with him forever. Was it really okay to give a name to this emotion?

I'm scared.

Discovering the shape of the love she held in her chest was terrifying.

Miyo knew very well the intensity and hideousness of the feelings exchanged between people. She also knew that those feelings could end up dragging in others, too, eroding and becoming a source of misfortune.

Just as she felt herself plunging into her thoughts, Kiyoka tapped her lightly on the shoulder, snapping her back to reality.

"Miyo, are you all right?"

"Oh, yes..."

Hastily bringing her hands down, she bowed once and moved along. She'd spent an awfully long time on a simple prayer.

Kiyoka pulled her by the hand to take her out of line, as if to escape the irritated gazes of the worshippers behind them.

"I—I'm sorry, Kiyoka."

"It's fine, but... What exactly were you praying so fervently about?"

Her heart skipped a beat.

She couldn't say it. She couldn't possibly tell him. Miyo thought back over things, feeling as though she had sullied her New Year's shrine visit with impure thoughts.

These were troubles of her own heart, something that she should have thought over alone, rather than entreat a god for help with.

Suddenly ashamed at her behavior, Miyo cast her eyes to the ground.

"Um...well..."

Kiyoka would surely be appalled with her if she answered honestly. Besides, she couldn't really be upfront about it with him to begin with.

"I, um..., " Miyo started.

"I pray for peace and tranquility in the Empire every year," Kiyoka interjected.

"That is a wonderful thing to wish for."

How fitting for a military man. Miyo didn't understand why he had

suddenly pointed this out to her, but even as she admired how magnificent a person he truly was, he continued on.

“I did add an extra wish this year, though.”

Perhaps it was because of the cold, but as he tilted his head and looked up at the sky, his ears looked slightly red.

“Kiyoka?”

“...That I hope I can...with you.”

The crucial part of his sentence was inaudible, his voice low and hoarse.

Yet Miyo held her tongue, unable to ask him to repeat himself. She could imagine what he had said.

I'm sure he shares my feelings.

She wanted to be with him. Forever, until this life of hers came to its end.

The shrine at her back, Miyo secretly made another wish.

After finishing their prayers, Miyo and Kiyoka wordlessly walked back down the approach to the shrine, which was flanked on either side with shops.

The line of worshippers stretching into the shrine grounds had been extremely long, but there was also quite the crowd bustling up and down the street stalls.

Miyo caught herself staring intently at the vendors, who were selling *daruma* dolls of every size, decorated evil-warding arrows, and bamboo rakes, along with other good luck charms for the New Year's occasion.

“Something catch your eye?” Kiyoka asked.

“Oh, um, well.”

She looked around and saw that no one else in the crowd, which consisted only of small children, was paying as much attention to the wares as she was.

Miyo stammered, blushing at her behavior, unbecoming a woman of her age.

She heard him give a small chuckle overhead.

“Look as much as you want.”

“Um, but it's embarrassing, so...”

She looked up at him as she spoke, and he gave her a smile. But a moment after they gazed into each other's eyes, they heard a sudden commotion break out amidst the hustle and bustle of the crowd.

No, that wasn't exactly it. While it had taken the sharp voices of the throng to draw Miyo's attention, her fiancé had already fixed his keen eye on a section of the throng beforehand.

“Kiyoka?” she asked.

“I can sense a Grotesquerie.”

"In a place like this?"

"That's right..." he answered vaguely with a scowl.

Miyo cocked her head at his inscrutable reaction before she turned to the crowd.

A group of people, wrapped in their kimonos and overcoats, had formed a ring where the flow of bodies had thinned. Was there a street performer of some kind in the middle? It looked like the people in the circle were watching a few in the center.

She couldn't get a good look at the other side of the crowd. But as far as she could tell, there wasn't any sign of the Grotesquerie Kiyoka had mentioned.

"It looks to be a gathering of some kind."

"No. That has to be the Gifted Communion."

Miyo's breath caught in her throat.

Does that mean...?

Suddenly, a newspaper article she had read came to mind.

Ever since the day the emperor was abducted, the Gifted Communion had rapidly begun extending their influence, to the point where the people of the capital were now aware of their existence.

The Gifted Communion was an anti-imperial organization headed by Naoshi Usui, the former marriage candidate of Miyo's mother, Sumi Saimori.

Miyo had come face-to-face with Usui, who called himself the Founder, once at a train station, and once more when he infiltrated the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit headquarters. However, these two encounters had been more than enough for her to understand the threat he posed.

Meanwhile, the citizens of the Empire were completely unaware that Usui's organization had abducted the emperor.

Consequently, the Gifted Communion were gaining followers left and right by claiming that they would build a new world using the superhuman powers of the Gifts they wielded.

Of course, not everyone supported them, as there were many citizens who wrote their claims off as dubious nonsense.

But since the sinister activities of the organization had been obscured, it was undeniable that society at large was showing interest in their propaganda.

Miyo looked at the center of the ring and saw three people wrapped in black coats. One of them was broadcasting a message in a booming voice.

"We are a peacekeeping squad from the Gifted Communion. Everyone, please take a look at this," he said.

A second black-clad man lifted up what resembled a rattan birdcage. Another commotion instantly broke out, and she heard shrieks

intermixed with the clamor.

Miyo immediately swallowed back a scream of her own.

“What is that...?”

A creature unlike anything she had ever seen was wriggling inside the cage.

Its entire body was dark brown, almost black, with white patches here and there. At first, she thought it was a quadrupedal beast of some kind, but upon closer inspection, it seemed to be a cross between a monkey and a bird.

There were two wings on its back. Its forelegs were five-toed and covered in fur, while its hind legs ended in three-toed bird feet. Its face was surrounded by dark plumes and tinged red, like a monkey's, except with black lips. The creature let out another strange cry.

Is that what a Grotesquerie looks like? It's terrifying.

An instinctual dread welled up from deep within her gut, and a cold chill ran through her body.

“Unbelievable. They think they can just get away with anything.”

Frowning slightly, Kiyoka took out a piece of white paper from his breast pocket and crafted a few familiars. A moment later, the numerous familiars soared upward out of his hand, flying away as if gliding on the winds.

Gone from her fiancé's face was his tranquil and peaceful expression from just moments prior, replaced by the downright chilling but immaculate visage of a military man.

“Kiyoka.”

“Don't worry. I just reported them to the person on watch. The Gifted Communion may be acting boldly out in the open like that, but it's still a criminal organization whose members are to be arrested on sight.”

Miyo nodded, still trembling slightly with shock.

The group of men who claimed to be a peacekeeping squad continued their speech.

“This is a monster that has existed in the Empire since ancient times. We refer to them as ‘Grotesqueries,’ however, they are also known as fiends or spirits. If left to their own devices, they bring harm to humans.”

The man's gestures and the authority in his voice gave him a strange sense of credulity.

Though the crowd wasn't necessarily enthralled by the presentation, many of them were still looking on eagerly.

“Kiyoka...why am I able to see that Grotesquerie?” Miyo asked in shock.

This was the first time Miyo had seen one in her twenty years of life. Her first time laying eyes on a Grotesquerie.

She lacked the Gift of Spirit-Sight, so it should have been impossible for her to process the horrible form of a Grotesquerie.

Miyo looked around and saw that she wasn't the only one who could observe the Grotesquerie's form. The people encircling the Gifted Communion men, who she doubted possessed Spirit-Sight themselves, were pointing at the birdcage in horror and curiosity.

Kiyoka brought his hand up to his chin and mulled over her question.

"We've already gotten a number of reports about this phenomenon. It's still under investigation, but the Gifted Communion may have created a technique to show Grotesqueries to people without Spirit-Sight or created Grotesqueries that are visible regardless."

"Is something like that possible?"

It sounded too far-fetched to believe. Her voice wavered.

Even Usui wouldn't have been able to develop such a fantastical technique, would he?

Only people with Spirit-Sight or those with even greater power—Gift-users—could observe Grotesqueries with their naked eyes. Apart from Miyo, a departure from this fact was incredibly rare.

"I don't know. But the Gifted Communion are two to three steps ahead of us in Gift and Grotesquerie research. It's reasonable to assume they may possess some technology beyond our comprehension."

Hearing Kiyoka's impatient murmur, Miyo was overcome with discomfort, a mix of frustration and irritation, but also slight yearning.

Miyo looked at the Gifted Communion members, still proudly continuing their speech, with a bit of indignation.

If those techniques do exist, then even I could...

The ability of Spirit-Sight, which she had longed for, but would never be able to obtain.

How many times had she thought of how different things would be if she had it?

She yearned for it even now, was obsessed with the idea of glimpsing the same scenery that Kiyoka and the others could see.

The Gifted Communion is being unfair.

This sort of display stirred up the desires of those without abilities. Even if she knew that this was their tactic, she couldn't help but be jealous.

Her hand trembled slightly as she unconsciously squeezed Kiyoka's. He gently squeezed her hand in return, trying to soothe her.

"Miyo."

"Yes?"

"You're fine the way you are."

His tone was decisive, perfectly steady. The strength in his voice

startled her.

“Kiyoka...”

His words always encouraged her. Miyo felt the envy burning in her chest slowly begin to fade as it smoldered, then once again turned her eyes toward the crowd.

The Gifted Communion’s address was still going.

“These Grotesqueries have run rampant here in our Empire from times immemorial. Yet the government has desperately tried to conceal their existence, neglecting to dispose of them proactively and ignoring the threat they pose. Even as they continue to endanger us now!”

Anxious voices flickered and spread through the crowd.

Anyone who had a full grasp of the situation would have understood their claims were ridiculous.

The government wasn’t actively obscuring the existence of Grotesqueries. In reality, most people wouldn’t have believed the government if they announced that supernatural creatures existed.

Furthermore, they certainly weren’t neglecting to eradicate them. Kiyoka’s unit was simply avoiding unnecessary bloodshed, annihilating only the Grotesqueries that posed an immediate threat instead of haphazardly exterminating them all.

It was indeed true that there were Grotesqueries all throughout the country. However, the government didn’t go out of its way to kill the ones that didn’t harm humans. Miyo thought this was a respectable way of dealing with things.

Conversely, the Gifted Communion was endorsing the massacre of all Grotesqueries, even the ones who never harmed humans.

Miyo found it truly impossible to agree with their claims.

Seemingly pleased by the unrest running through the vicinity, the Gifted Communion members in the center of the ring spoke more empathetically.

“However, the Gifted Communion and its peacekeeping squads are different. We possess Gifts, the power to annihilate these Grotesqueries, and bestow those with true justice in their hearts abilities of their own. We also proactively exterminate monsters that would show hostility to mankind. We promise to protect all of you! Now then, your attention please.”

They lifted the caged Grotesquerie into the air.

Just like before, the dark brown creature let out a shrill cry and thrashed about.

“Now, I shall show you all the work of the gods that we use to slay these Grotesqueries. It is a power given to the chosen known as the Gift, which defies all human knowledge. Keep your eyes peeled and witness it!”

The third black-clad man, who had been waiting in the wings, stepped forward and held up his right hand. Then a watery substance slowly oozed up from the bottom of the birdcage.

Cries of shock rang out from among the spectators.

The liquid was the product of a Gift—there were no tricks or sleight of hand behind it. Water continued to pool in the cage until it covered half of the Grotesquerie's body.

"Kiyoka..."

Miyo appealed to him without a second thought, clutching his sleeve.

At this rate, the man's Gift would kill the Grotesquerie in the cage. Grotesqueries didn't have a physical body. Nevertheless, there was clearly a living being sitting inside the cage.

This was in no way different from senselessly shooting a wild animal. Even if that wasn't technically illegal, it was certainly not praiseworthy behavior, either.

Her chest pounded with restless disquiet.

She wasn't exactly scared or sad. It was a downright terrible feeling.

"Wait. They're here."

"Huh?"

Miyo turned in the direction Kiyoka was looking.

There, she spotted a group dressed in familiar military uniforms.

"Yes, yes, sorry. If you could just let us through, please and thank you!"

Godou was at the head of the group, casually calling out to the crowd. Behind him were more faces Miyo recognized from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

"We're the Imperial Army's Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit. Please make way."

The bystanders conspicuously moved to the side of the street upon hearing the words *Imperial Army* and seeing the group of uniformed men.

"All right, everyone, time to get to work. Arrest these fellas lickety-split."

"Yessir."

Following Godou's all too sloppy instructions, the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit pushed through the crowd, meaning to arrest the Gifted Communion members.

Godou kept an eye on his men for a few moments before he walked over to Miyo and Kiyoka with a wave, a huge grin on his face.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation in reporting this activity!" Godou said.

"Listen, you," Kiyoka moaned, bringing his hand to his forehead with a look of exasperation at his subordinate's banter.

“You really helped us out here, let me tell you. Good ole Commander, yes sirree.”

“Now isn’t the time for jokes.”

“Aww c’mon, I have to keep fooling around... How else am I supposed to keep going?”

Godou made a show of sagging his shoulders and heaving a sigh, looking absolutely exhausted.

Things had to be serious if Godou, who was always smiling and chuckling, looked this dejected.

“...Have you been busy with work?”

Hearing Miyo’s concerned question, Godou vigorously lifted up his head.

“Yes! A thousand times yes! I’ve been so swamped, I’m ready to drop dead. And it’s only the start of the year!”

“Don’t take his complaints seriously, Miyo.”

“How could you say that?! Why, you make it sound like I was purposefully trying to garner sympathy or something!”

The glare Kiyoka gave Godou, who looked ready to stamp the ground in indignation, was exceedingly cold.

“Am I wrong? You’re always goofing off—how is now any different?”

“But it’s New Year’s! Just because we’re on duty doesn’t mean I can abide being exploited like this!”

“You volunteered for this. And you’re the one who told me you wanted to throw all your energy into work to make up for your lengthy medical leave.”

At Kiyoka’s curt response, Godou covered his face with both his hands and moaned. “Horrible, just listen to what I have to deal with.”

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit really was busy, but contrary to his performance, Godou actually seemed to be all right.

That being said, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit’s response time had been swift indeed.

Amazing. They wrapped everything up in the blink of an eye...

No sooner had the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit arrived than the Gifted Communion members were being hauled off. The Grotesquerie in the cage Miyo had been concerned for was already secure in one of the military personnel’s hands.

It was strange to be anxious about the safety of a supernatural creature, but she had hoped it could avoid extermination.

The crowd that had formed around the Gifted Communion members also gradually began to thin, either from dread or the military crackdown dampening their enthusiasm.

Things had turned out okay this time, but this was just the tip of the iceberg.

“All jokes aside, the Gifted Communion’s area of activity is only growing wider and wider, and these sorts of speeches and demonstrations of Grotesquerie disposal are happening in greater numbers. We still have enough wiggle room at the moment for you to take some time off, Commander, but it won’t be long before we won’t be able to handle everything without you,” Godou said, to which Kiyoka calmly nodded.

“Right. Are we any closer to learning how normal people are able to see these Grotesqueries?”

“I’m not sure. We don’t have any specimens, so whatever hypothesis we may have will be difficult to prove. This time, while it’s not unharmed, we were able to get our hands on one of these said Grotesqueries, so...”

Godou trailed off awkwardly, and he shot a sideward glance at Miyo.

From how he talked about it, Miyo could imagine that the Grotesquerie holed up in the cage was going to be experimented on. Godou must have been worried he would offend her.

However, even Miyo knew that pretty words weren’t enough to keep society in motion.

“Don’t worry about me. Please continue.”

“Apologies... I’m guessing they’ll move forward with some type of research. Though, well, it’ll still probably be impossible to catch up to the Gifted Communion’s level of knowledge.”

“I imagine you’re right. Once you return to the station, I want you to ask that they begin their investigation immediately,” said Kiyoka.

“Understood.”

Godou bowed, then returned to where the other unit members were standing. When all was said and done, Kiyoka couldn’t have asked for a better subordinate.

Kiyoka ruffled his bangs, looking slightly irritated.

“Miyo. I’m sorry, but—”

“I know. It’s okay.”

Miyo was able to correctly surmise her fiancé’s thoughts, and replied with a nod before he could finish.

She had known from the moment they came across this situation and Kiyoka told her he was reporting it to the military.

“Take these.”

He handed her three small folded-up pieces of white paper. They looked just like the paper used to create familiars.

“You have the improved protective charm I gave you before, right?”

“Y-yes.”

These were familiars he’d made in case of an emergency.

While Miyo didn’t have Spirit-Sight, she was a Gift-user herself, if

only barely. She possessed the talent of a slightly above average arts-user. In addition, Kiyoka had made some improvements to his protective charms that assisted her in invoking their powers.

It was still difficult for her to make a familiar from scratch, but as long as she had some assistance, she could at least use supernatural devices.

“It may take me a while to get back, but I want you to wait here. I’ll try not to let you out of my sight, but you should use that if anything happens.”

With those words, he left her side. She watched as Kiyoka pushed his way through the dispersing crowd to follow after his subordinates.

Miyo felt a twinge of loneliness in her heart.

But when push came to shove, Kiyoka was a military man who needed to protect the country and its citizens before he was her fiancé.

She couldn’t selfishly insist that he stay right by her side because she didn’t want to be alone.

Kiyoka was always thinking of her safety first and foremost. Even after spotting the Gifted Communion members, he must have made sure to call Godou’s group to the scene without trying to immediately stop them himself to prioritize her safety over anything else.

She had gotten a good look at Kiyoka issuing orders to the unit members.

Even now, he was taking the trouble to make sure Miyo could defend herself and ensure that she wouldn’t leave his sights. He was doing his utmost to protect Miyo from Usui.

That was why, as someone set to become a soldier’s wife, she had no other option beyond quietly sending him on his way.

I can’t afford to be happy and carefree, either.

Miyo tightly gripped the piece of paper close to her chest.



The following morning, every newspaper had the same main feature: “Grotesquerie Seen at Shrine on New Year’s Day.”

The purpose of each article was to give a detailed introduction on the Gifted Communion’s activities, and they were thoroughly preoccupied with the question of what Grotesqueries were.

However, other articles took a critical view of the government and military, openly questioning them for keeping the existence of Grotesqueries and Gifts under wraps until now.

Naturally, Kiyoka had been wearing a grimace since early morning.

Miyo wasn’t sure what she should say as she began placing their breakfast on the low table, a New Year’s lineup of *ozoni* soup, boiled

meat and vegetables, and pickled sides.

“*Gaah...* Miyo.”

“Yes?”

Kiyoka lifted his eyes up from the newspaper, letting out a heavy sigh from deep in his gut.

“I’m going to the station today. You’re coming with me.”

“Okay.”

“Want to read it for yourself?”

Miyo nodded, opening up the newspaper he handed her and scanning the pages.

As she expected, the words *Gift* and *Grotesquerie* leapt off the page in no small quantity, coupled with turns of phrases arousing animosity.

The article outlined that the government had already established a unit to dispose of Grotesqueries, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit. However, the story questioned pouring the Empire’s hard-earned taxes into an organization that, if the Gifted Communion’s claims were correct, neglected their duties.

Why, why are they writing about Kiyoka’s unit like this?

A scant few of the Empire’s citizens had seen the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit carry out their missions themselves.

On the other hand, there was no doubt that anyone and everyone in the capital had heard the Gifted Communion’s assertive propagandizing.

Whose claims were easier to believe? From an objective standpoint, it was inevitable that opinions like these would pop up.

The problem was that Gift-users were not a well-known group of people to begin with.

Given that the generations of the emperors had inherited their rule based on whether or not they possessed the Gift of Divine Revelation, knowledge about the existence of Gift-users had been limited to a select group of people involved with government affairs.

Most of the Empire’s citizens didn’t know the details behind how crown princes were selected and venerated the emperor out of a belief that he descended from a divine lineage.

Before the Meiji restoration, the upper echelons of society had accepted Gift-users battling Grotesqueries on the emperor’s orders as perfectly natural. But in the current age, where science had gained currency over the mystical, there was even a significant group of nobles who had decided that Gifts and Grotesqueries were dubious nonsense.

In other words, the amount of Grotesquerie sightings and the opportunity to encounter them had declined from times past.

This was why the public lacked any sort of understanding about the realities of Gifts and supernatural creatures.

Nevertheless, Miyo found it difficult to tolerate these articles, which only sided with the Gifted Communion and spread their claims while brazenly criticizing the military for not doing enough.

“Don’t let yourself get so upset,” Kiyoka murmured, seemingly picking up her dark feelings. “You can’t expect much from the public’s perception of things. For many, many years, the only people fully cognizant of the existence of Gift-users were the ruling class and their direct subordinates. It’s far too late to worry about being misunderstood.”

“But, after everything you’ve done...,” Miyo insisted.

If Kiyoka was going to ignore what people were saying about his unit, then she had no idea where to place her disconsolate emotions.

She subconsciously let her eyes droop, and a heavy sigh slipped from her mouth.

At this, Kiyoka rested a hand on her shoulder to cheer Miyo up.

“Don’t worry about it. Still, it’s going to be tough to deal with how the public reacts going forward.”

Although the Gifted Communion’s activities were individually small in scale, they were propagandizing in areas that gathered many eyes.

If the press kept reporting on the story and spreading it further, there was no doubt that public consensus would shift toward criticizing the government and the military.

Just how much of the burden would be placed on Kiyoka’s Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, singled out as a scapegoat?

No matter how much he tried to cheer Miyo up, she couldn’t help feeling melancholic at the troubling events that had kicked off the New Year.

“More importantly, Miyo.”

“Yes?”

“Can you get the preparations in order for that thing we talked about?”

After a moment of confusion, she realized what he was referring to.

“By that you mean... Wait, um, are we really going through with that?”

“Prince Takaihito was enthusiastic about the idea. I imagine that many will be opposed to it, but it should be feasible if he is persistent about it.”

The crown prince had recently proposed a bold strategy to Miyo and Kiyoka.

It would involve placing two people being targeted by the Gifted Communion, himself and Miyo, in the same location, to strengthen and concentrate their protection.

Given what had happened up until now, it was self-evident that Miyo was being targeted, but apparently Takaihito was also in danger.

The Gifted Communion had kidnapped the emperor to exploit his authority, so it stood to reason that the crown prince would be a thorn in their sides since he was the true power behind the throne.

That suggested they were going to attempt to dispose of Takaihito soon.

This was where his plan came in.

Since moving the crown prince out of the Imperial Palace wasn't a good idea, only Miyo and those who could be trusted would be admitted within the Imperial Palace. Then they could concentrate their defenses against the Gifted Communion, which consisted mostly of guards from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, on a single location... This was Takaihito's eminent proposal.

But just as moving Takaihito from the palace was a poor move, it could be argued that letting a large numbers of outsiders into the Imperial Palace was dubious from a security perspective.

As such, the Ministry of the Imperial Household had held off on approving the strategy even into the New Year. Miyo had written the proposal off as something that only had a chance of being realized.

But now, the plan was finally starting to feel real.

"So does that mean...?"

"It does. Starting from the seventh, when Prince Takaihito's schedule quiets down, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit will shift their base of operations to the Imperial Palace and bolster security there."

Before she knew it, Miyo had brought a hand to her mouth.

It was quite shocking that such an absurd—irreverent as it was to put it that way—plan had ultimately been approved. The same was true of Takaihito himself, of course, but the effort that Ookaito, acting together with the crown prince, must have given was unfathomable to her.

The Imperial Palace was the residence of the most esteemed family in the Empire, the core of the nation. It was a tightly shut area, and it needed to be kept that way.

Kiyoka closed his eyes and let out a sigh.

"Of course, you'll be coming with us, too. As for how long, let's see... Please prepare enough things for half a month's stay."

"Okay."

"Also," Kiyoka continued once Miyo replied in the affirmative, "I'm having Hazuki and Yurie come along as your attendants. I'll arrange things on my end."

"What... Is that okay?"

Miyo was surprised by the unexpected good news.

The two people needing the Imperial Palace's protection right now were Takaihito and Miyo.

Normally, it would be an honor simply for a commoner like Miyo to receive the same level of protection as Takaihito. Despite that, she was worried that she would feel so unworthy of staying there by herself that she wouldn't be able to eat.

On top of that, she'd assumed that if she did get attendants, they would have to be from the military or the Ministry of the Imperial Household.

It would be a huge relief if Hazuki and Yurie could be there with her instead.

Sis is a Gift-user and Mr. Ookaito's previous wife, so that I can understand, but I'm stunned they'd get permission for Yurie, too...

She was incredibly grateful to Ookaito and Takaihito, who must have done everything they could to make these arrangements.

"Sorry to trouble you like this."

Miyo shook her head when she saw Kiyoka look down with regret.

"It's okay... I'll do anything I can to help," she responded.

The whole reason things had ended up like this was because Usui had targeted Miyo. She was grateful to Kiyoka, and she certainly wasn't angry about the trouble.

In fact, she should have been apologizing...

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I keep causing."

Miyo placed her fingers down on the tatami and lowered her head.

Just how long had it been since she had done this?

Since moving into this house last spring, she had gradually stopped prostrating herself on the floor to apologize. Just a year prior, she had apologized this way many times a day, as though it was as natural as breathing to her.

"Stop it, Miyo."

She found the slightly flustered tone in Kiyoka's voice amusing, and lifted her head up with a smile.

Miyo felt like here in this house, by his side, was the first time she had truly been able to become human. She learned what it was like to be praised, to have someone sympathize with her. She couldn't even quantify just how much that had helped her to feel like a normal person.

That was why there wasn't anything Kiyoka needed to apologize for. Miyo had received more from him than she could ever possibly repay in kind.

"Thank you, Kiyoka."

He received her quietly spoken words of affirmation by covering her hand with his own.

This really was enough for her.

She didn't need to name the emotions in her chest or say them aloud—she just knew them.

Miyo gently pushed her warm feelings out of sight, into the depths of her heart.



CHAPTER 2



The Imperial Palace and a Restless Day

The first three days of the New Year's holiday still weren't over, and yet Kiyoka was dressed in his usual military uniform and working at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station.

He felt guilty about Miyo as he headed to work that holiday morning, but he figured she had her own things on her mind as well. She had even made him lunch today, never once showing any hint of being annoyed or troubled.

Inside the station, every member of the unit was present, even those who weren't on duty for the day.

Although they were all involved in the matter, there wasn't anything that a small division like the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit could do about what was being reported in the papers.

That meant most of the people there didn't have anything in particular to do, but Kiyoka suspected that they all had refused to just sit around doing nothing in light of the situation.

"Commaaaander, Major General Ookaito's going to be here soon," said Godou.

Kiyoka nodded slightly at his subordinate, who had gotten there ahead of him.

His office was already a mess, littered in documents collecting the complaints and inquiries that had been sent to them.

These were mostly anonymous, so they could be ignored after giving a broad-strokes report on what they said, but there were just so many to go through.

On top of this, even outside the incidents involving the Gifted Communion, there were several times more reports involving Grotesqueries than usual, to the point where even the military

headquarters was struggling to handle the situation.

However, they couldn't just yell at the papers to stop, and they couldn't retract a story that had already spread far and wide. Kiyoka and his men couldn't do anything beyond handling each situation as it came.

Godou carelessly tossed some more papers onto Kiyoka's desk, an absolutely fed-up look on his face.

"...I'm going to receive Ookaito once I've sorted out a few more of these documents," Kiyoka said.

"Whaaat? Can I come, too?" Godou whined.

He was purposefully trying to procrastinate.

Though Kiyoka perfectly understood that Godou was just trying to escape from this torturous paperwork, he didn't think it would be a bad thing to bring his aide along with him.

Going forward, Kiyoka wouldn't necessarily be able to take command in the field and issue orders all the time.

"Okay. In that case, pass on some amount of the busywork to the men who came into the station without anything to do."

"Got it. All right!"

Kiyoka sighed and rose from his seat.

While they were conversing, Ookaito's time of arrival drew near. The two left Kiyoka's desk a mess for the time being and headed for the entrance of the station.

A short while later, Ookaito's automobile came into view.

"Sorry about scheduling a meeting on a holiday, Kiyoka," he said, getting out of the car.

"Not at all, thank you for making your way out here."

"Appreciate you working today, too, Godou," Ookaito added.

"Oh, not at all, sir. You don't need to worry about me," Godou said.

As a member of military leadership, Ookaito had been pulled into prosecuting the Gifted Communion and handling the news about them, so he had given up his New Year's vacation to work nonstop. There was a slight hint of exhaustion mixed in with his stern features.

"Still, Kiyoka, you could really use a break. I'm sure you wanted to relax."

The commander feigned impassivity and responded to his boss by saying, "Work is work, sir." This prompted a glare from Ookaito, as though he was reproaching him for being obstinate.

He really wished the general wouldn't press the point any further. Otherwise, it would shake his convictions after he had persuaded himself that the situation was unavoidable.

As the three men walked to the reception room, Kiyoka mumbled something in an attempt to get a bit of revenge.

"You're working on your vacation yourself, aren't you, Major

General? As busy as you normally may be, I'm sure you would've been able to take some time off during the first three days of New Year's."

At this, Ookaito's grimace deepened.

"...Right. Sorry."

"My sister seemed to be somewhat lonely, so please go pay her and Asahi a visit if you can."

Last night, when the sun had long set below the sky, Kiyoka stopped by the Kudou estate to exchange New Year's greetings with his older sister Hazuki before he went home.

While they had just seen each other at a private party near the end of the year, his sister seemed to be worried, in her own way, about her former husband Ookaito's inability to come greet her in the New Year. She was also anxious about not getting to see her son, Asahi.

At Kiyoka's words, Ookaito's expression took on a hint of sorrow, much like the one he had seen come to his sister's face the night before.

"Yeah. I'll go see her when things settle down."

Ookaito and Kiyoka entered into the tidy reception room and sat down on the sofas to face each other, while Godou declared he would go pour some tea and started back down the route they had come.

Without waiting for their tea to arrive, Kiyoka and Ookaito immediately got into the matter at hand.

"You've already been told that Takaihito's plan was accepted, right?"

"Yes."

Preparations were already underway to transfer the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit to the Imperial Palace on the seventh.

There's no question that the Gifted Communion are trying to capture Miyo and take Takaihito's life.

Almost all the people aware of the Gifted Communion's activities had the same view on the situation.

They were convinced that Usui's organization had kidnapped the emperor to exploit the authority he held.

If they could kill the imperial heir and wielder of real state power, Takaihito, after abducting the emperor to use as a puppet, then there would be no one to hinder them. The Gifted Communion would be able to run the country in the emperor's name according to their will.

This was because there was no other individual of suitable standing to lead the nation. While there were a number of other people with noble status, they lacked the Gift of Divine Revelation, which barred them from ascending the imperial throne in the first place.

Although there was a formal line of succession, it was plain to see that debates over the potential successors' abilities to manage the country or not, their presence or lack of a Gift and Spirit-Sight, and

their popularity or unpopularity would sow discord in the central government

Rotten royalty was still royalty. Since there currently wasn't a system in place to recognize a change in succession outside the previous head of state dying, whoever held the title of emperor would still hold power over the country, even if the power of Divine Revelation was lost.

For this reason, abducting the emperor and assassinating Takaihito had become the Gifted Communion's objective.

Miyo couldn't be ignored, either. She possessed the power of Dream Sight.

Her Gift allowed her to enter and manipulate people's dreams. It was simple for people with Dream Sight to brainwash someone in their sleep or seal them away in the dream world to prevent them from ever waking up.

Of course, while Miyo wouldn't do anything of the sort, if the Gifted Communion took her hostage or trapped her into some other situation where she was forced to use her power, it wouldn't matter.

I can't exactly say I'm completely impartial here, but...

His feelings for Miyo aside, Kiyoka had to acknowledge that it would be quite dangerous if Miyo were abducted.

Concentrating everything in the Imperial Palace felt a bit like fighting with their backs up against the wall, which didn't exactly thrill him. However, Takaihito's proposal did seem like the most efficient way of protecting him and Miyo.

"The government and the Ministry of the Imperial Household have signed off on the plan. Keep on moving ahead with it as scheduled."

Kiyoka nodded obediently, making sure his displeasure didn't show on his face.

"Understood."

Ookaito must have surmised that Kiyoka was hiding some dissatisfaction, but he didn't point it out.

Their conversation hit a lull, and Godou came into the room with a tray, as if he had been waiting for his moment.

"I'm back!"

He put down a tea set with accompanying cakes for the two of them, and they transitioned into the next topic of discussion.

"Now then, regarding the Gifted Communion's activities and the newspaper articles."

Tension ran through Kiyoka's whole body like a pounding heartbeat.

They were currently on the back foot cracking down on the Gifted Communion.

The investigation into how people could see Grotesqueries without Spirit-Sight was getting nowhere, and propaganda about the Gifted

Communion was being spread with abandon. This was a failure on Kiyoka's part as the commander of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit tasked with handling all supernatural incidents.

Things would have never turned out this way if he had been able to predict what Usui or his subordinate Houjou would do next. Clearly, he had mismanaged his opportunities to get the upper hand on the pair.

Kiyoka had no excuses to give.

"Relax, relax. This is an extremely abnormal situation, and I don't really mean to criticize you about it. It's definitely not your fault that we're so far behind in our research on Gifts and Grotesqueries. Prince Takaihito even said there wasn't much else that could've been done."

"Still, there was surely a defter way of handling things."

It wasn't productive to go back and forth about something that was already in the past. But Kiyoka had already been bested by Usui several times at this point, so he couldn't just shrug off his past mistakes.

Ookaito lifted his lips into a grin as he watched Kiyoka reprimand himself.

"It's not like you to say that. Instead of agonizing over things, you're the type to think about what to do next instead, aren't you? That's what you should be doing here, if you ask me."

"...My apologies."

Kiyoka bowed slightly, to which Ookaito heaved a sigh and rubbed his chin.

"That said, this latest incident has been strange right from the get-go."

"Strange, sir?"

"Information about Grotesqueries is supposed to be strictly controlled, you see."

The subject of Gifts and supernatural creatures was usually under governmental control.

Information would occasionally leak from their regulatory network into the public, but it was generally something small enough that the government could laugh off as nonsense.

If newspaper companies and journalists made a lot of noise about leaked information, they were guaranteed to have government eyes on them.

So despite the Gifted Communion's propaganda push, it should have been inconceivable that every last newspaper would publish articles on Gifts and Grotesqueries as if they were credible.

"Where, and how, did the regulations slacken...? We're already putting pressure on the papers and making them prep a correction, but I don't expect it will have much of an effect."

By issuing a correction, the best they could hope for was to end the rumors with the credibility of the article strengthened. It would convince people that the government was threatening the papers to prevent the inconvenient truth from getting out.

It didn't help that a majority of papers had ran multiple articles on the Gifted Communion's assertions—that sustained news push was more than enough to get the public to accept the information as true. It was far too late for corrections.

“At this point, the only way we could reverse public opinion would be to get the people to focus on some sort of great military achievement.”

“That's right. But we can't just pull a feat like that out of thin air.”

If they were going to create some great military achievement to report on, they'd have to start a war of some kind.

Thus, in this case, the optimal solution was...

“So our only choice is to clamp down on Grotesquerie-related news and wait until the uproar dies down on its own?” Godou chimed in from Kiyoka's side.

“Indeed,” Ookaito responded, his face clouded.

But that won't go very well.

Information control had never slackened enough to invite a situation like this before, which meant that someone must be deliberately letting things slide.

And that person had to be someone with close ties to the government and the management of the state.

This mysterious figure also must have had an objective, one that requires they show contempt for the government, for the military, and for the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

Whoever this person was, they weren't going to sit quietly while the military waited for the people's memories of Grotesqueries to fade.

On top of this, if the Gifted Communion's accusations and their activities continued to spread, it was only a matter of time before the existence of Gift-users would start to be credibly reported on throughout the country.

“The Founder is trying to create a whole new world. One where every human is given the chance to receive supernatural abilities.”

Houjou's words replayed in the back of Kiyoka's mind.

It was easy to imagine.

To create a world where everyone could have a Gift, Usui would first need everyone to know that Gifts existed.

Grab power, make the existence of Gifts and Grotesqueries known throughout the country, and increase the number of artificial Gift-users. From there...

Usui's actions up until then had naturally led to that objection.

First, he would abolish the current structure of the country using the emperor's authority.

The Gifted Communion would espouse preferential treatment for Gift-users.

The management of this new country would fall to the Gift-users whose physical and supernatural abilities surpassed that of the ordinary person, while on the other hand, those without a Gift would be able to rise up the ranks as artificial Gift-users if they so desired.

And at the top of this hierarchy would sit the Usuba family.

Usuba Gift-users could control the human heart and mind. They were superior in ability to every other Gift-user and every other human being.

Gift-users would control the common people without any Gifts, and those Gift-users would in turn be controlled by the Usubas. Kiyoka suspected that this was the organizational structure the Gifted Communion was trying to create.

Everything Usui has done up until now has laid the foundation for this type of society, too.

As had the abduction of the emperor, and extending his influence inside the government. As had spreading information about the existence of Gifts and Grotesqueries.

It appeared that Usui's plan was more or less bringing Japan back to square one in order to lay the groundwork for a new system where Gift-users, and the Usuba family above them, reigned supreme.

If the Gifted Communion could achieve that, they would have no use for even the emperor himself, and they could safely dispose of him.

Right now, it was as though all the Gift-users in the state, and even the imperial throne itself, were pawns in Usui's hands.

Were Kiyoka and the government truly continuing down the correct path? He couldn't be sure.

"Kiyoka."

"Yes, sir?"

"You need to be emotionally prepared for this," Ookaito said with a stern expression.

The general's words were heavy. Kiyoka didn't have to ask what he needed to be prepared for, exactly. He knew without hearing it for himself.

There was only one thing that a soldier needed to ready himself for.

Kiyoka tightened his fist. He glanced at Godou to find that his subordinate's face was scrunched up as well.

"Will it devolve into civil war? Oh, my apologies, sir, I—"

Godou hastily apologized for voicing his thoughts, but Ookaito held up his hand to cut him off.

“No, it’s fine... There haven’t been any clear omens as of yet, it sounds like. However, apparently Takaihito has a premonition that some sort of large political change is going to happen.”

If Kiyoka’s speculation was correct, then there absolutely would be political tumult.

A sea change enabling the Gifted Communion and Usui to overthrow the country...one that would let them abolish everything and take over.

Once that occurred, even if Usui’s schemes should ultimately fail, neither the government nor the military would make it out unscathed. Naturally, that extended to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, too.

Kiyoka rubbed his brow.

What I need to do is...

The role he needed to play as a military man, as a Gift-user serving the imperial family, hadn’t changed.

And yet he found himself thinking of his fiancée before his duties, or anything else, for that matter. A part of him thought that as long as he could protect her, maybe that was enough.

Perhaps he was a failure as both a soldier and a Gift-user.



A soft breeze caressed her cheek, accompanied by the faint scent of verdure.

When she came to, Miyo found herself standing in the middle of a blurred landscape, the kind she would see between sleep and reality.

Is this the Usuba house?

The only sound she could hear was the rustling leaves and grass. She had a feeling she had seen the quaint, scenic garden before.

This was the house that her real mother, Sumi, had lived in before she was married off to the Saimoris. Though the exterior had since been remodeled, the building was currently under the protection of her grandfather Yoshirou and her cousin Arata.

But this version of the house from the past didn’t just look different—it also had a different atmosphere.

This is a dream, isn’t it...? That’s right. I saw the Usuba house in a dream once before.

She had come to this place just once in the past, right after she had encountered Usui on her trip back from the Kudou family villa.

In that dream, Sumi and Naoshi Usui had talked intimately together. What was she going to see this time?

Her consciousness still hazy, Miyo looked down at both her hands, which were vague and out of focus, before thinking about the situation.

She didn't understand why her dreams would take her to the Usuba house of the past.

Miyo had gained much control over Dream Sight, though it still wasn't perfect. At the very least, she no longer had to worry about her Gift activating against her will.

In which case, that meant she was using her powers unconsciously. But was something like this even possible?

"I'm not sure if this house will be okay, the way things are going."

The questions in her head were interrupted by a young girl's voice.

The voice she heard was one she had undoubtedly no real memory of, yet had encountered many times within her dreams, enough to recognize it immediately—her mother's.

This dream had to be taking place a number of years after her previous one.

The guilelessness Miyo had heard in Sumi's voice before had been replaced by listlessness.

"Don't worry, Sumi. I'll figure out something, just watch. I don't like the Usubas or the Usuis, but if it's for your sake, I will."

Next, she heard Usui's murmurs on the wind.

She walked ahead a bit more and spied the two of them in the shade of the garden.

Sumi was sitting on the roots of a tree, hanging her head slightly. Usui was crouched down in front of her, taking her hand and trying to cheer her up.

"Thank you, Naoshi. But I'm sure there's nothing that can be done about this. It's possible the person pressuring our family...is someone very, very high ranking, the kind we could never touch."

From Sumi's words, Miyo gathered she was dreaming of the point in the past when the Usuba family had begun to fall on hard times.

She'd already heard about what had happened from Yoshirou. Sumi's apprehensions had become reality for the Usubas.

The high-ranking person she'd mentioned was none other than the reigning emperor himself.

Was Naoshi still trying to cheer Sumi up? For just a moment, Miyo thought she had seen a sharp, and cold, glimmer in his eyes.

"Sumi. You don't have worry about all that stuff. I'm going to destroy it all—everything troubling you, everything that's making you distressed, everything making you sad."

"I told you not to be violent, didn't I?"

"Violence isn't always a bad thing, you know. If you destroy everything bad, grind it into dust until there's nothing left, then you can collect everything you love and rebuild it all anew. You and I can rebuild everything—we can make a world all for you. A place that's kind to you."

A terrified shiver ran down her spine.

But Miyo was the only one who felt that way, for Sumi herself just gave a feeble smile of exasperation.

“Sheesh, you know there’s no way you could do that. Enough with the childish jokes, okay? Believe me, I know your feelings on the matter.”

She was wrong. What Usui had just said had been anything but a joke.

They were his truest feelings. After this period of time, he would go on to create the Gifted Communion, which was working all these years later to create a new world.

Miyo took a single step backward. In that brief moment, her foot crunched against the gravel on the ground.

“Ah...”

A lone sound escaped her lips.

This was her dream, so there shouldn’t have been any chance that Sumi and Usui would realize Miyo was there, yet she couldn’t help but worry for a second that they would realize she was eavesdropping.

She instantly brought her hands to her mouth, despite the fact it was unnecessary. Or at least, it should have been.

Huh?

For some reason, Usui slowly turned his head, before he stared assuredly right where Miyo was standing. Of that, there was no doubt.

Why...?

The young man had turned his eyes, filled with an abnormal gleam, toward her.

Her heart nearly stopped from the shock as she froze, as though she were a frog being stared down by a snake. Then everything went black.

The morning they were to go to the Imperial Palace was a clear winter’s day, the sky cloudless and blue.

Miyo and Kiyoka both hastily finished their early-morning breakfast and dressed themselves before they locked up their house in preparation for their temporary absence.

There was so much to do that Miyo didn’t have a spare moment to analyze the dream she’d had the night prior.

I can think about what it means later... That should be fine.

She recalled Usui’s stare from the dream.

It had seemed like he was looking straight at her, but ultimately, it was still a dream. She must have been overthinking things. Besides, it wasn’t an urgent matter.

In an attempt to distract herself, Miyo examined her luggage, which she’d packed with everything she would need for her stay.

After double-checking the contents of her bags, she carried them

one by one to the doorway. Kiyoka then piled them into the open space inside his automobile.

When he finished loading everything, the inside of the car was packed so full that there was barely enough room for the two of them.

“Should’ve sent some of the bags ahead of us,” Kiyoka mumbled after climbing into the driver’s seat, grabbing the wheel and glancing behind him.

Miyo smiled slightly and nodded.

“I agree. By the way, we’re meeting up with Sis and Yurie there, right?”

“Yeah. I already told them we’d all get together at the Imperial Palace.”

He drove slowly down the road, which was damp from the melting snow.

Their destination, the Imperial Palace, had already been converted into a simplified branch station for the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

Kiyoka and the rest of his troops would stay in a makeshift campsite there, arranging chances for them to return home in shifts.

Conversely, Miyo and her attendants, Hazuki and Yurie, would be staying in a separate building that was attached to Takaihito’s residence at the Imperial Palace by a roofed passageway. It had been emptied out for the three of them.

The building was hardly meant for lodging, as it was typically used as a small venue or waiting room during festivals and other functions, but now wasn’t the time to be voicing any complaints on the matter.

The Gift-users in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were utilizing their abilities to set up a barrier around Takaihito’s residence, along with the building where Miyo, Yurie, and Hazuki were staying.

Miyo felt so unworthy to be residing in the same Imperial Palace that housed the most august family in the Empire while also receiving the same protection as the imperial heir, Takaihito, that she was on the verge of freezing up.

Nearly forgetting how to breathe, Miyo let out a sigh, at which Kiyoka consoled her.

“It’s okay. Prince Takaihito himself said he would accommodate you as much as possible. The prince isn’t very formal, either, so just think of it like you’re staying at an inn.”

“...Like an inn? I could never.”

A normal lodging house wouldn’t have made her anywhere near this nervous. There was no way she could trick herself into thinking that the Imperial Palace was just another place to rest her head.

It would be one thing for Kiyoka, who was familiar with Takaihito since they had been acquainted from a young age.

I’m not in any position to get close to someone like Prince Takaihito in

the first place.

While Miyo had been raised in a Gift-user family, the Saimoris no longer gave birth to strong ones, and had become unable to fulfill their role. On top of that, Miyo had once been a poor-mannered woman without any true education to speak of.

Normally, a family of that standing would consider a daughter like Miyo a disgrace. They would resort to either marrying her off to a family with extenuating circumstances, driving her out, or keeping her in their estate until she died.

And indeed, Miyo had been no exception, and was married off to the infamously coldhearted Kiyoka in place of her stepsister.

Kiyoka had been kind, and now she was able to live happily, but if that hadn't been the case, she would've spent her whole life in misery.

Given her circumstances, it was absurd that she had even been given the opportunity to exchange words with Takaihito, much less stay in his residence.

"Believe in yourself. Remember that you're betrothed to the head of the Kudou family. Walk as though looking around the Imperial Palace is beneath you."

She widened her eyes with shock at Kiyoka's suggestion.

Her fiancé had lived as a Gift-user his whole life. Gift-users pledged their loyalty to the ones bestowed with Divine Revelation, such as the emperor and crowned prince.

That was why she was baffled to hear him describe the Imperial Palace as "beneath her."

Still, she understood that he was only exaggerating to cheer her up, and her lips softened into a smile despite herself.

"Thank you very much. I'll work hard and try to be confident."

"Right, well. I'm not really sure that comes to you with hard work. Hazuki will be there with you, so if you're ever unsure, just act like she does or do what she tells you, and you'll be fine... At least I think so."

"Okay. I'll follow Sis's lead."

"Good, but, well, don't take after her *too* much..."

As they spoke, the automobile came upon a road that Miyo wasn't very familiar with.

A place that normally she'd almost never approach. At last, the Imperial Palace came into view.

The scenery around the palace was unlike any other place in the capital.

Compared to the hustle and bustle of downtown, there weren't nearly as many pedestrians, and the buildings were more uniformly Japanese in appearance. Upon closer inspection, Miyo saw that there were many large corporate offices in the area, along with office

workers dressed in suits. The atmosphere was calm and composed on the whole.

In front of the solemn gate that separated the Imperial Palace from the outside world, she could see a number of people dressed in military garb standing with the gate guards.

The men, who she vaguely recognized from her stay at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, stood at attention and bowed the moment they spied Kiyoka in the driver's seat of his automobile.

Kiyoka stopped the car close to the soldiers.

"Good work."

"Good day, Commander!"

"It's okay if I park nearby for a little while, right?"

"Yessir! Not a problem."

After speaking with one of the soldiers from the group, Kiyoka once again started the automobile and parked it just past the gate, parallel against the fence that encircled the palace grounds.

"We need to pass through two more gates from here. Is that okay?"

Miyo nodded in response to Kiyoka's question.

They did have a lot of luggage, though. Her things alone comprised three bags total, far more than she could hope to carry in one trip. Just as this occurred to her, two members from Kiyoka's unit arrived and offered to take their bags.

A telekinetic Gift of some kind would have easily taken care of things, but Gift-users had a tacit agreement to avoid using their powers in front of commoners as much as possible. Obviously, times when they were left with no choice, like emergencies or expelling Grotesqueries, were the exception.

Miyo insisted on carrying the bag that held her valuables and personal effects and followed behind Kiyoka as he boldly strode through the Imperial Palace gate.

To enter into the palace grounds from the very first outer gate, they would need to cross a large bridge.

This structure extended across the deep, wide moat that circled the periphery of the Imperial Palace grounds, wide enough for two automobiles to drive past each other with ease, and it took about a hundred and twenty paces to cross on foot.

Tearing her gaze from the view in front of her, she glanced down at the moat below the bridge to find that it was green and cloudy.

After they finished crossing the bridge, another came into view. They had just passed through the outer gate and were now at the inner one. Inside this layer of the palace they saw that the grounds were divided by several layers of moats, ponds, and fences, which would serve as a defense mechanism against invaders.

They passed through the second gate and stepped out onto a well-

maintained road, which was surrounded by several gardens. Though they weren't much of a sight in winter, the beautiful trees and flowers planted here would have been a sight to behold in spring or summer.

Up ahead, they saw a single parked horse-drawn carriage.

They weren't going to ride in that, were they?

The sight took Miyo by surprise, but Kiyoka offered an explanation.

"This carriage is used for transporting people around the grounds of the Imperial Palace. It's typically reserved for imperial guests, but Prince Takaihito had it sent for us."

"I-incredible..."

Horse-drawn methods of travel were slowly but surely falling out of favor, replaced by automobiles, bicycles, and even trains.

Since Miyo had lived without ever leaving the grounds of her home up until recently, this was also her first time seeing a horse in the flesh.

"We'll take the carriage to Prince Takaihito's residence."

Saying that, Kiyoka immediately approached the vehicle, and Miyo followed after.

The horse at the head of the carriage was not one native to the Empire, but a breed from the West with a large and powerful body. Miyo felt almost overwhelmed next to it, knowing the horse could easily send someone her size flying.

The carriage itself, meanwhile, wasn't in the usual box-shaped style. Instead, it was similar to a rickshaw, with open-air seats that were covered by a hood. Befitting the Imperial Palace, however, it was far from cheap; even the fabric covering the seats was clearly of the highest quality.

Miyo took Kiyoka's hand and stepped up into the slightly elevated passenger seat first, before he hoisted himself up into the carriage.

After making sure the two of them were seated properly, the driver took the reins in his hands and urged the horse forward.

Miyo looked around while listening to the carriage wheels clatter in accompaniment with the hooves of the horse. Across a small moat partitioning the grounds, she saw what were likely facilities that related to the Imperial Palace itself, a couple of governmental-looking buildings replete with people scurrying about.

Far in the distance, she could see an area that resembled a forest, whose thick trees were a departure from the other gardens.

Above all of this stood a strikingly large palace. This had to be where the emperor lived. To Miyo, the Imperial Palace grounds were practically a town or small nation of its own.

The carriage ran along the well-maintained pathway, crossing over several bridges that spanned ponds and moats, and passed by the large central palace before stopping in front of the building right behind it.

This was Takaihito's—the crown prince's—residence.

It was one size smaller than the emperor's residence, but still magnificent and expansive, nonetheless.

When Kiyoka and Miyo alighted from the carriage, they were immediately approached by several people they knew well.

"Oh, Miyo!"

"Sis."

The first to walk up to them was Kiyoka's older sister, Hazuki.

Since Miyo had been spending most of her days at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station as of late, she'd had less time to spend on Hazuki's etiquette lessons. Miyo couldn't have been happier that the end of the year and the New Year's holidays had given her more chances to see Kiyoka's sister.

On the other hand, Kiyoka gave an icy greeting to his older sister like always.

"Sis..."

"Look who the cat dragged in. All your men are already hard at work, you know. Shouldn't you hurry up and join them?"

"I don't need you to tell me that."

At his sister's officious comment, Kiyoka furrowed his brows in displeasure.

Right as a hint of tension came over the group, Yurie suddenly poked her head out from behind Hazuki.

"Young Master, Miss Hazuki, I don't believe this is the place to quarrel with each other."

The siblings put their grievances aside and ceased arguing once Yurie made that reasonable observation.

Miyo carefully waited for calm to return to the group and greeted the two women with a slight bow.

"Good morning, Sis, Yurie."

"Good morning to you, too, Miss Miyo."

"Morning, Miyo."

"Um, thank you both for being here for me."

They had both come here as Miyo's attendants.

The pair hadn't hesitated to come live with her, even though they both knew that the stay had the potential to last longer than the two weeks' estimate they had been given. Miyo had to show them her gratitude.

To her surprise, however, neither women seemed bothered by the arrangement in the slightest, and they cheerfully smiled back at her.

"You don't have to worry about anything, Miyo. You've done nothing wrong, and this is what the situation called for. We're family, so let me help out."

"It's exactly as Hazuki said, Miss Miyo. I'm nervous about being in a

castle for the first time myself, but I promise to ensure you're able to live here in peace."

Hazuki was her usual dependent self. The fact that she could be so confident in a place like this would leave anyone self-conscious. Unable to follow her example, Miyo was struck with admiration for her.

And though Yurie had to be nervous to be in such an imposing place for the first time, her expression was as gentle as ever.

When Miyo tried pointing this out, Yurie gave this response:

"Oh please, Miss Miyo. This old woman has been around for many, many years. It takes a lot to unsettle me these days."

It was truly encouraging to have them both as her attendants.

"Thank you, both of you. I hope our time together goes well...," Miyo said.

A short while later, the unit members who had been entrusted with carrying Kiyoka's and Miyo's luggage appeared. After Miyo and Kiyoka accepted their bags, they entrusted themselves to the courtiers in Takaihito's residence.

With their general salutations out of the way, it was then decided that Miyo and the others would have a meeting to discuss how she would spend her days going forward.

Perhaps "meeting" was overselling things. It wasn't a strict affair, but more of a brief check-in. The participants would be Kiyoka, Miyo, Hazuki, and Arata.

Speaking of Arata, he showed up right before the others were about to be on their way. Kiyoka eyed Miyo's cousin with suspicion.

"Arata Usuba. Where have you been?"

"Hah-hah-hah. Your hair will start falling out if you sweat the small stuff."

Miyo stared hard at him.

His slim figure looked especially refined in the light-colored vest and black suit he had on, which was complemented by his necktie and coat.

Coupled with his affable and gentle smile, Arata looked the picture of a dapper young gentleman.

She had met with Arata both at the same year-end party as Hazuki, and also when she visited the Usuba house to give her New Year's greetings. In both instances, he had been his usual self, not the slightest bit different.

Normally, this would have been cause for celebration. It would suggest he wasn't working himself up over the fiasco of the emperor being snatched away right before his very eyes.

However, she couldn't help feeling uneasy when she looked at Arata's countenance.

I hope I'm simply under the wrong impression...

Arata was the type of person to sacrifice himself out of a sense of duty. Though he lived under a unique set of rules, he was still a Gift-user.

Consequently, he had just as much of an obligation as his peers to obey and protect the emperor. Was Miyo the only one who felt a perilously false cheer about him?

No, no, I should stop worrying about things I don't need to. If it's enough for me to notice, then someone who knows much, much more than me, like Kiyoka, would definitely have immediately inferred the same thing.

She needed to focus on herself. She was fully aware that she wasn't clever enough to worry over multiple things at once.

"Miyo."

"Y-yes?"

Miyo shook herself out of her mental digression as the source of her concerns addressed her with a smile.

"I've been tasked with being your personal security."

"So I heard. Thank you."

When she replied, Arata's smile grew even brighter.

"I'm thrilled I get to spend time together with you. We'll be continuing your studies about Gifts, too, so I hope you're ready."

Ever since Miyo had awoken to her Gift, Arata had continued to give her lectures, teaching her about the supernatural powers. Her studies had stagnated recently, with a majority of her time being spent at the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station, but it appeared that they would be able to begin again while she was staying at Takaihito's residence.

Miyo automatically straightened up her posture and nodded.

"Yes, I'll do my best."

That said, the fact that Kiyoka had agreed to the idea of having Arata be Miyo's bodyguard, after being so reluctant to do so before revealed just how very serious he was about the situation.

It also showed just how formidable of opponents the Gifted Communion and Naoshi Usui were.

"If you destroy everything bad, grind it into dust until there's nothing left..."

What exactly were the bad things Usui had referred to?

He said that he had come for Miyo. In which case, "destroying"...or rather, killing her, couldn't have been his aim.

But what about everything else? The things and people who were precious to her, that she was terrified of losing? What would happen to them?

It was too horrifying for her to imagine.

"Is something wrong, Miyo?"

Her cousin was staring at her.

Arata was a member of the Usuba family. Their Gifts had the unique ability to control the mind, just like the powers passed down in the main Usui line.

In which case—Miyo asked the question that had been on her mind in a whisper.

“If you’re protecting me, that means *he’s* trying to come after me, right?”

“Naoshi Usui, yes. Personally, I’d like to always be at your side protecting you, but that would be why I’m here now.”

“His Gift is very powerful... Do you know some sort of way to counteract it?”

Whether there was some way to overcome it or not, it likely wouldn’t change what Miyo needed to do, nor would it change Kiyoka’s decision or Arata’s role. Nevertheless, she couldn’t help but ask.

She didn’t want to believe that it was impossible to resist someone who so boldly asserted his capacity to destroy everything.

“I have thought of various possibilities myself.”

“...Do any of them seem like they’ll be effective?”

“I’m not sure. That being said, I’m reluctant to discuss things that are indeterminate, so I can’t give you an answer right now.”

That made sense. Even if Arata did have a way of countering Usui in mind, it wasn’t the best of ideas to talk about it in the open, where someone could be listening.

Miyo hung her head, reflecting on her impudence.

“Now then, let’s head to our meeting. Everything starts there.”

At Arata’s insistence, they crossed the threshold into Takaihito’s residence.

Miyo couldn’t afford to feign indifference as an outsider. She was unbearably impatient. She had regretted causing such a fuss during the incident with Kaoruko, but when it came to Naoshi Usui, she was undeniably a central figure in the affair.

Perhaps there was nothing she could do. Not when she was so weak and hadn’t mastered her Gift.

Yet she couldn’t stand to sit on the sidelines and let the others protect her without doing anything for them in return.

But maybe it would be best if I didn’t do anything at all.

The last time she’d confronted Usui, she had jumped out in front of everyone without thinking.

Things had only ended well because fortune had been on her side. Her last-ditch effort could have gotten everyone else killed, and if Kiyoka hadn’t arrived in time, then Usui would’ve carried her off.

But what exactly was she supposed to do if she was essentially

powerless?

With these doubts still in her mind, she entered the sitting room they had prepared for their meeting and sat down on one of the floor cushions.

"Now, this may not be the most important topic, but..." Kiyoka said, before he began listing the things they needed to agree upon.

The first thing that Miyo would have to be careful about at Takaihito's residence was to avoid leaving the grounds of the residence on her own. Permission or not, the only places she could go were the building where Takaihito resided, the detached structure where Miyo and the others would be living, and the area in between them. In essence, these two edifices would serve as the focal point of the barrier that would be projected around them.

The second stipulation was to not invite anybody in without advance notice, even if it was someone she was familiar with. This was, of course, a precaution against a trap from Usui.

The third rule was to obey all of Takaihito's orders.

"There are instructions...from Prince Takaihito?" Miyo asked Kiyoka, unable to really grasp what he meant.

The military, specifically the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit under Ookaito, was playing a central role in this operation. Normally the Ministry of the Imperial Household would employ their own specialized techniques to protect the emperor and the royal family, but they were going up against the Gifted Communion this time.

The organization consisted entirely of Gift-users, from their founder, Naoshi Usui, to members of the Houjou family, to people who had been given artificial Gifts. Guards who had been trained to fight normal humans would be ineffective against these foes.

Because of this, Takaihito was entrusting security to the army, even though he had developed this plan himself.

"Yes. He said something to the effect of wanting to talk with you about something."

"W-with me?"

"That's right."

"Just what could he want to speak with me about...?"

"Who knows?" Kiyoka replied, looking puzzled.

Miyo couldn't believe she had anything in common with Takaihito to talk about. To be honest, it didn't seem like they would really be on the same wavelength with each other. Takaihito's personal dispositions, circumstances, his way of thinking... Miyo imagined that they were all completely different from her own.

"In any case, if Prince Takaihito asks you to do something, please obey his wishes," Kiyoka said.

"I—I understand. I'll do my best," she replied enthusiastically.

Hazuki chuckled.

"It's fine, you don't have to get so worked up. If he says anything inappropriate, then I can help you, too, after all. Leave it to me. And while I'm at it, I can raise a complaint or—"

"Sis! Please don't tell me... You're not planning on scolding Prince Takaihito, too, are you?"

"What? Even he has a weakness or two, you know. Stuff from when he was little, for example."

"Stop jumping at the chance to poke and prod at people's insecurities like that, seriously."

Despite the deep wrinkles forming on Kiyoka's brow, Hazuki was all smiles.

I—I'll definitely have to stop Sis if she starts lecturing Prince Takaihito.

It was imperative that she avoid a situation where Hazuki exploited the weaknesses of the imperial heir apparent to get him to submit to her. The dignity of the Empire was on the line.

Miyo swore this to herself while feeling a different kind of nervousness pound loudly in her chest.

"Now then, Commander Kudou. I imagine you have some arrangements to make regarding me, as well?" Arata remarked, casually raising his hand.

He would be serving as Miyo's personal bodyguard, but he wasn't part of the military, and though he was physically strong, he didn't have the same level of knowledge about guarding others that Kiyoka and his men did.

"I do. We're going to restrict your contact with the outside world, too, Usuba. Though, given that you'll be at Miyo's side all day long, I can't imagine you'll have much opportunity to be out and about anyway."

"Good point... If, by any chance, I am to confront Usui, how should I handle him?"

Startled, Miyo looked over at Arata's face.

Was such hypothesizing really necessary? After tightening up the security so much, was there any possibility of Usui finding his way here?

No, no, there obviously is.

Usui could manipulate people's senses with his Gift. No matter what sort of people they had standing watch, Usui could slip right under their nose by confounding their sight or hearing.

Although the people in charge of the barrier had designed it to repel Usui specifically, they couldn't be certain that it was foolproof.

A stern look suddenly came over Kiyoka as well.

"You think that's really necessary after all."

"Of course it is. I won't say that anything is possible for Naoshi Usui.

If he was truly all-powerful, then he would have taken control of the Empire long before this and eliminated anyone who could interfere with his plans, but none of that's happened yet. His Gift must have some kind of restriction."

Arata paused to take a breath, and looked straight at Kiyoka.

"However, I can't say there's zero chance that he'll slip through the defenses here and be allowed to sneak in this far, either."

"...You make a fair point. I fully agree. If worse comes to worst and Naoshi Usui appears before you and my fiancée within this residence, you need to protect Miyo. If that time comes and you have any strength to spare beyond that, then..."

The words *kill him* never left Kiyoka's mouth, but everyone could pick up on what he was implying.

"I don't need to capture him?"

"I'll put it like this instead— Do you think you can actually capture that man?"

Kiyoka and Arata exchanged glares, their gazes so intense that sparks seemed to fly between them.

At some point, either Hazuki or Miyo gulped loudly in the face of the tension in the air. Arata's and Kiyoka's auras were so intense that Miyo couldn't tell who had made the sound.

The two men rammed their wills against each other solely through their unblinking gazes, until Arata finally closed his eyes, dispelling the tension.

"No, I don't think that's happening. Just capturing and holding him? Absolutely out of the question."

"That's what I thought. Still, there's no need to be proactive about killing him. Don't bite off more than you can chew."

"Got it. I'll keep that in mind."

After confirming two to three more matters of discussion, the meeting adjourned.

Unlike Miyo and Hazuki, who only needed to prepare for their lives in the imperial residence by unpacking and handling other chores, and unlike Arata, whose task was only to watch over Miyo, Kiyoka was very busy.

The military operation, particularly when it came to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, couldn't begin without him.

Despite understanding how impossible it may have been, Miyo hoped that Kiyoka wouldn't wear himself too thin from work as she watched her fiancé head off to the base camp outside the residence.

"Well, now that my fussy little brother's gone, why don't we hurry up and finish the unpacking so we can let our hair down a little?"

Hazuki flashed a smile shining with vitality.

“Letting your hair down, even at a time like this? Color me impressed.”

From how Arata put it, Miyo couldn't tell if he was simply being sarcastic or not, but she agreed with him. In the simply impressed sense of his comment, of course.

Miyo was so nervous that letting her hair down seemed all but impossible.

In fact, merely looking around her made her overwhelmed by the majesty and solemnity of the building.

It was an archaic, one-story wooden structure, bereft of any easily understood ostentation or splendor.

Instead, the craftsmanship of the building was impressive, like with the wood planks used in its long corridors and the ceilings. The lengthy pieces of lumber had been transported without being cut anywhere, a feat which must have been unbelievably expensive.

There was also the fact that the lintels and columns, which were ornated with *ranma* transoms engraved with detailed designs of flowers, trees, birds, and beasts, weren't blemished at all. Nor did the *tatami* flooring show the slightest suggestions of fading or wear...the list of examples went on.

The endless amount of spotless details made clear to Miyo that there had been a significant amount of time and money spent on both the construction and administration of the building.

Along with the quality of the courtiers, even the very air was different not only from the house of the average commoner, but a cut above even the estates of the average rich man.

“Well, I'm quite used to it,” Hazuki responded. “When my father was still actively serving His Majesty, Kiyoka and I would often come and go from the Imperial Palace. We were also around Prince Takaihito, too.”

“That makes sense.”

As expected of the Kudou family. Their status as the highest ranking Gift-user family was well-earned. That was simply how often they had the chance to have audiences with the emperor.

However, when Miyo considered that the emperor the previous Kudou family head, Tadakiyo Kudou, served had brought hard times down on the Usuba family and brought a great number of people pain, her mood immediately dowered.

Thinking that there was someone with even more feelings on the subject than her, Miyo looked over at her cousin. Although he wore a smile on his face, she sensed a coldness contained within it.

Hazuki must have picked up on their subtle reactions, for her face darkened.

"I'm sorry. You two both must hate to hear about the emperor. It was thoughtless of me to bring him up."

"Not at all..."

Hazuki wasn't at fault here. Casual words innocently spoken often brushed against topics that someone might not want to touch on.

Miyo shook her head side-to-side.

"It's okay. We're here in the Imperial Palace right now, after all. We can't let it bother us every time his name comes up."

Arata nodded in agreement.

"Miyo hit the nail on the head. Besides, we can't move forward if we let ourselves get hung up on this every time. It's clear that the principles behind Usui's actions involve our family's past. And His Majesty is the root of those problems. We can't afford to avert our eyes with mixed feelings on our faces."

"Still, that wasn't very considerate of me. I'm sorry."

Miyo's chest ached as she watched Hazuki slump.

However, while her heart darkened when she thought about the Usubas and Usui, she was still interested in hearing about the Kudou family's past, about Hazuki and Kiyoka, and about their father Tadakiyo.

"Please don't worry about it, Sis. Tell me more stories from your past. I'd like to hear them."

"...Really?"

"Yes."

Miyo consciously raised her lips into a smile, and Hazuki let out a relieved sigh.

"Thank you, Miyo. In that case, I'll tell you some of the really valuable ones."

"Valuable?"

"That's right. The juicy details about when Kiyoka was little."

Miyo agreed that those stories were indeed valuable. Her interest was very, *very* piqued.

She wanted to know everything and anything about her fiancé. She was sure it was a normal feeling to have. Not special at all.

I'm going to continue supporting Kiyoka from now on. I'm going to become a wife who can do that for him. That much is plenty.

She didn't need anything else, so Miyo avoided going down that line of thought.

Ignoring the emotions that threatened to bubble over when uncovered, she sealed them away once more.

Miyo was given a large parlor room to stay in.

If she took away the sliding screen doors, which was adorned with a pine that must have been painted by a famous screen artist, the space

would have been one continuous room, large enough to hold a banquet. It was clear the magnificent hall wasn't meant to be used as lodging space.

Judging by the way the courtier had spoken when showing them their rooms, the Imperial Palace must have given her this space under the assumption that a daughter from a respectable family would be accustomed to such space, but Miyo was completely unable to feel relaxed in the room.

"Quite spacious, isn't it?"

"Yes. Very."

Miyo sincerely agreed with Yurie's comment, who had come along to assist Miyo with her unpacking.

I wonder how many times bigger this room is compared to my room back in my old home...?

Even when she closed the screen door, it was huge. To the point even where the luggage she had placed in a corner of the room seemed out of place.

"Now then, if you'll pardon me, I will be using this room here."

In the end, it was decided that Miyo and Yurie would use these two rooms, separated by the sliding screen door.

There was talk of Yurie having a separate room of her own, but the advantages ultimately aligned for Yurie and Miyo, since it would be easier for Yurie to serve Miyo if she was nearby, and they'd actually be able to use the open space in the room properly.

"Absolutely. Thank you for being here to help me."

"It's my pleasure. Why, I'm looking forward to having the chance to look after you around the clock, Miss Miyo."

Miyo was about to say that she didn't need to always be at her beck and call, but she swallowed her words when she saw Yurie happily start humming to herself.

The interior of the room had been furnished with bedding and a dressing table, a kimono rack, and a rattan box to hold smaller items.

After graciously rejecting the courtier's offer of assistance, Miyo started to take out the small number of belongings she had brought with her from her bag. By the time she had finished tidying up, it was long past noon.

"How's the unpacking going, Miyo?"

She heard Hazuki's voice from outside.

Worried that she may have kept Hazuki waiting, Miyo hastily opened up the screen door into the hallway.

"I'm all done."

"Did you have any issues?"

Miyo shook her head side to side.

What could possibly *be* a problem? Putting aside the room's

excessive size, it was perfect in every single way, and she could feel the courtiers' and Takaihito's care and consideration toward her at every turn.

"Not at all. They seem to be treating us exceptionally well."

"That's true. What about you, Yurie? Will you be able to live here just fine?"

Yurie nodded with a smile at the question, having stepped up behind Miyo without her catching on.

"Yes, I'll be all right."

"Really, that's good to hear. Why don't we have lunch, then? I had them prepare it for us in my room."

"I'm allowed to come with you for that, right?"

Miyo was startled to hear Arata's voice. He must have been acting the part of bodyguard, standing at the ready along the wall next to her room.

"What about your unpacking, Arata...?"

He greeted Miyo's question with a smile.

"It's all right. With my line of work, I've grown used to staying in places beyond the walls of my home. It won't take me too long."

"Right, the Usubas operate a trading company as their public identity, right?"

Arata nodded at Hazuki's question.

"Yes. That said, my Giftless father leads the company, and I simply help him out as a negotiator."

In the Gift-user sphere, the Usubas had recently begun to go by their own family name, but in larger society, Tsurugi and their trading company was the more well-known name. Most likely, even if the Usuba name permeated more than it had now, they would continue to use their multiple family names as they had been. This was just the reality of the situation.

Hazuki's room lay beyond a bend in the hallway, some number of chambers removed from Miyo's.

Its size was about the same as Miyo's. It was similarly divided in two by a sliding screen as well, with one portion being used as a luggage storage area and the other for everyday use.

A dining table for four had been set up in the parlor room, which was spacious even after it had been split in two.

"Time to see what sort of food's served in the Imperial Palace."

Miyo cocked her head at her sister-in-law and her excited anticipation.

"Is this your first time eating in the Imperial Palace, too, Sis?"

"No, I've attended dinner here before. There was a large number of dishes to choose from, and they were all as luxurious as you'd expect. But I've definitely never had lunch here before."

Hearing this, Miyo keenly felt just how valuable this experience was. If she stopped to think about it, it was obvious. It was exceedingly rare that someone like her, neither royalty nor even a courtier, would be spending several nights in the Imperial Palace.

Just then, she wondered what Kiyoka was doing for lunch.

I hope he makes sure to get a meal in...

Knowing him, he might easily skip out on a meal or two when work was busy.

She couldn't be at his side to look after him, so there was nothing she could do, but she would need to interrogate him about his eating habits the next time they saw each other.

Once everyone sat down and gave thanks for the food, the lids were removed from the dinnerware that lined the table.

The contents of the lunch were much more mundane than Miyo had anticipated.

There was freshly cooked white rice, and warm soy sauce-flavored clear soup. The main dish was a piping hot white fish boiled in soy sauce, and the sides consisted of chopped seasonal vegetables with dressing, along with simmered root vegetables that looked rich in flavor.

However, the attractive display, from the dinnerware to the food presentation, clearly showed an attention to the lunch spread's beauty, and Miyo could vividly see this meal was a step above the average lunch.

She first took a sip of the steaming bowl of clear soup.

"Delicious..."

Was the broth different? The subtle and refined fragrance of bonito fish spread from inside her mouth and up to her nose.

The boiled white fish, the seasonal veggies, and the root vegetables were all perfectly seasoned, their flavors neither too weak nor too strong. She felt like her own social status was rising with each bite.

"The Imperial Palace really is something else, if they're preparing such delicious food not only for banquets but lunch as well."

As Hazuki gave her spellbound praises, Yurie nodded along repeatedly to every word.

On the other hand, Arata didn't react at all and silently continued eating his meal.

Now that Miyo thought about it, he didn't seem to have much interest in food. Back when she had temporarily lived with the Usubas, he didn't pay much attention to his meals, either.

"Arata. Is the food not to your liking?"

Miyo's question prompted him to widen his eyes for a moment, before he shook his head with a smile.

"No. It's very tasty."

“But...”

She faltered, hesitant to come out and clearly say that he didn't seem to be enjoying it much. However, Arata evidently picked up what was on her mind.

“Forgive me. It's not that the food isn't tasty, it's more of a vocational curse, so to speak.”

“Vocational curse?”

“I travel all around the world for my work. There are countries I go to where the food they provide is delicious of course, but there are other times when I don't find it to my taste. In those instances, I need to make sure I don't insult the local people, so I strive to keep my reaction the same whether I enjoyed the food or not. It's become a habit of mine.”

His reasoning made sense.

Miyo herself hadn't ever stepped foot out of the Empire, and the only Western food she had sampled had been modified to appeal to the Empire's citizens, so it didn't feel like the actual thing to her. Nevertheless, she knew in theory that each region had their own climate and customs, and that the cuisines they had developed to appeal to their people wouldn't necessarily be appetizing to the palettes of visiting foreigners.

Arata's explanation offered Miyo a glimpse of the difficulties he'd experienced working as a trading company negotiator and needing to accept the hospitality of people from a variety of different regions.

Once they had gotten through most of their meal, Hazuki spoke up.

“About our schedules while we're here.”

Yurie and Miyo sat upright, and Arata slowly turned his attention to Hazuki as well.

“We want to try to keep our lives as normal as possible while living here, right? The only thing is, we're being treated as guests, so we don't need to do any chores... Though really, the Imperial Palace has its set customs and traditions and functions on a minutely tracked daily schedule, so if we jump in to do things ourselves, we'll just be causing extra work.”

When she'd first arrived at Kiyoka's house, when she'd visited her father and mother-in-law at the Kudous' villa, and when she'd started spending her days in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit station—

—Miyo always helped out with the chores everywhere she went, but this was one situation where she couldn't do so.

I have to be extra careful about not doing anything unnecessary.

She felt more at peace when she was working, but if she would just be causing problems, she couldn't really call that work anyway. She would need to be prudent about it.

Miyo would have a different set of tasks to attend to while she was

here.

“You’ll be studying with myself and Arata. And hard, too,” Hazuki said to Miyo.

“Okay.”

“As for you, Yurie, we can’t really afford to take up the courtier’s time, so can I leave in you in charge of cleaning our rooms and the like?”

“Yes, absolutely. Leave it to me.”

Yurie thumped her chest, full of pride. Her lack of nerves was so out of place with the grandness of the setting that Miyo had to stop herself from bursting into laughter.

“And lastly, Arata. What sort of orders have you been given?”

He lightly nodded at Hazuki’s question before answering.

“I’m generally going to be teaching Miyo while I remain at her side guarding her. However, as an Usuba, and a member of the main family that Usui’s is branched off from, I imagine that the military will want my counsel or support from time to time, as well.”

“Right. So you’ll be guarding Miyo, but if there’s some other business you need to deal with, you’ll be away from the residence, then?”

“Well,” Arata continued, seeing the grim countenance on Hazuki’s face as she confirmed his reply. “I don’t plan on being away for significant lengths of time, and there should be someone else to guard Miyo in my stead while I’m gone. I’m sure that it’ll be someone you’re familiar with, too, and not some unknown face.”

When she heard it would be “someone familiar,” the first person that came to Miyo’s mind was the woman with whom she had reaffirmed her friendship with, Kaoruko Jinnouchi.

She was still working in the capital as a member of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

Kaoruko had originally been dispatched from the old capital to work in Godou’s stead while he was hospitalized, but even after Godou had returned to action, it was decided she’d remain here.

Rather than oust her in light of the fact that she’d betrayed the military, albeit under duress, the top brass was having her remain in the capital, where there would be more eyes on her.

I hope Kaoruko is getting along fine...

Considering her deeds, it would be difficult for her to return to her position as Miyo’s bodyguard. Moreover, she typically patrolled around town outside the station, so she wouldn’t be able to enter the Imperial Palace, much less Miyo’s temporary residence.

However, Miyo felt a bit dejected to think that she wouldn’t be able to see her at all like this.

Be that as it was, she wasn’t in any position to request a visit from

Kaoruko, so there wasn't anything she could do about it.

"What I mean is, there's no need to worry, Miyo."

"Okay."

Miyo nodded, though it was nearly impossible for her to not worry about Kiyoka and company while they labored tirelessly.

There were a great many people doing their utmost to keep her safe. Miyo couldn't possibly raise any objections to that.



The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had set up camp in two places—a section of the grounds where the various facilities that presided over the Imperial Palace administration, the Ministry of the Imperial Household, and the Office of the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal were crowded together, as well as in a garden situated right across from Takaihito's residence.

The former, the advanced guard, was closer to the gate than the crown prince's palace, had lax security restrictions. But the latter, the rearguard, was so close to Miyo and Takaihito that anyone who wanted to enter would have to undergo a strict search to be let in.

After his meeting at Takaihito's residence finished, Kiyoka first popped his head in at the rearguard camp.

"How are things going?"

As soon as their superior came to check on them, Kiyoka's subordinates straightened their postures and bowed with a "Good morning, sir." He questioned them as he passed through their midst and stepped into the central tent of the camp.

"Oh, gooood morning, Commander... We're almost finished stationing everyone. No problems as of yet," greeted Godou, who had been charged with overseeing the rearguard.

The Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was stretched very thin at the moment. The soldiers posted to the two camps in the Imperial Palace and maintaining the barrier were indispensable, but they'd also needed to leave some troops behind at the station. On top of that, their regular workload hadn't lessened, either.

If the Gifted Communion didn't attack the Imperial Palace, it would mean Godou and the other skilled unit members had been stationed here for nothing. Nevertheless, they obviously needed to be prepared for the possibility of being raided.

Kiyoka had been quietly mulling over the situation.

"Good work. Make sure you don't forget to take breaks in shifts."

"Understood."

Despite Godou's serious reply, Kiyoka glared at his subordinate a moment later as a sickening grin spread across his face.

“What?”

“Oh, no, no, it’s nothing. It’s just that, you get to have Miyo so close by while you’re working, and it’s a real shame you don’t get to guard her yourself, that’s all.”

“.....”

No matter what, he couldn’t snap and say something like, “If you feel that way, why don’t you show a bit more sympathy for your boss?” If he did, it would suggest he truly did wish to be by Miyo’s side guarding her.

Though that was, in fact, the truth.

It’s frustrating to leave Miyo in someone else’s hands.

Kiyoka didn’t necessarily distrust other people. But he couldn’t help thinking she’d be safer if he had joined her in Takaihito’s residence, and it annoyed him that he was unable to do so.

“But, Commander.”

“What?”

“You still gotta be sure to drop in and see Miyo’s face at least once a day, okay? She’s your fiancée, after all.”

His subordinate had grown curiously meddlesome. If he wasn’t here, the extra work would be a nuisance, but when he was around, he was obnoxious.

Fed up with Godou and his teasing, Kiyoka glared at the man to vent his frustration.

“I was planning on it anyway, I don’t need you to tell me that.”

“Huh?!”

Godou’s exaggerated surprise rubbed Kiyoka the wrong way, too. If Godou had the time to make fun of him like this, then maybe he needed to give him something else to take care of.

Sensing Kiyoka’s fouling temper, Godou slumped his shoulders and wiped away his smirk.

“...Apologies. I got carried away.”

“That’s better. As long as you get it.”

“But this just means that you’ve really grown, Commander. In the past you would’ve just told me, *ahem*, ‘Nonsense. Why do I need to waste time on something like that?’”

A number of the unit members standing by in the tent burst into laughter at Godou’s impression.

“...Oh really?”

Putting aside the neck-wringing they’d all earned for later...

Kiyoka agreed that if it had been anyone else besides Miyo, he certainly would’ve responded in such a fashion. Such was how little interest he had in the subtle emotions of others.

So as loathed as he was to admit it, Godou was exactly right.

I probably should’ve shown more interest sooner.

He vaguely sensed that she had begun to turn her feelings his way. Despite how embarrassed she felt, she responded to his kisses, and every now and again, she would look up at him with upturned eyes and pink cheeks, as if something was on the tip of her tongue.

However, she would never voice the most crucial words. Kiyoka was still finding it difficult to decipher her heart.

I doubt there's any guilt at this point, either.

Despite the ongoing Usui problem, Kiyoka had purposefully kept insisting that he was unconcerned about the nature of his fiancée's Gift, and Miyo must have understood that.

In which case, what exactly was keeping Miyo's lips sealed?

Is it Usui's fault, then...?

At this point he had begun to see the Gifted Communion's founder as the source of it all. He didn't deny that, in part, he was simply blaming the man for his frustrations.

If the source of Miyo's worries was truly the notion that she shouldn't be open with her frivolous emotions at a time when everyone was busy dealing with the Usui threat, then he would take out all his anger and then some on the man when the time came.

"Commander? You're not kicking around some salacious thoughts in there, are you?"

Godou's impertinent question brought Kiyoka back to reality.

He still had time. Moreover, he planned on going to see Miyo once a day at the very least, so if slowly, day by day he prodded her about it, then— No, no, that could lead her to see him as an obsessive and nasty man.

His thoughts began to go off the rails yet again. Kiyoka cleared his throat for a moment and dodged the question.

"Enough of this nonsense. Don't you have something to report to me?"

"Report? Oh, right, I sure do."

Godou cocked his head for a second before he clapped his hands together in recollection.

"They just keep coming—the Gifted Communion and those visible Grotesqueries of theirs, I mean."

"Well, hurry up and make your report then."

The "visible Grotesqueries" Godou had referred to were the creatures that the Gifted Communion were using in their propagandizing. Even people without Spirit-Sight could see them.

It was possible that the technology developed by the Gifted Communion was merely making normal Grotesqueries appear in the eyes of the common people, but they referred to them with this separate moniker for the sake of convenience.

"The troops on patrol in the city have cracked down on two

incidents today alone. They were able to book the perpetrators of the first incident, but the other group got away. It's not even noon yet and we're already at two, so we could see close to ten incidents today."

"Any damages?"

"Nope. No real injuries to speak of. The groups don't really get violent or fight back, either."

Godou shrugged, looking a bit fed up with the whole matter.

The Gifted Communion had to be trying to improve their image with the general population if they weren't putting up any resistance. By passing themselves off as obedient, they could make the soldiers taking them away look hostile instead.

That could inspire journalists to write more articles expressing hostility to the military. The headline would probably read something like, *Army Forcibly Imprisons Nonresistant Citizens*.

Just who within the government had deliberately loosened the restraints on the press?

There wasn't any communication yet from Ookaito that they had actually identified the perpetrator. If the person in question was in a position of significant power, there was a chance that they would go forever unidentified.

I can't do anything about that, but...

Gift-users tended to go into the military and stick to fighting, so it was difficult for them to work as bureaucrats. That held true for Kiyoka as well, and he had no idea who in the bureaucracy could influence the government.

The only option was to leave the political side of things to Ookaito.

"Oh, one other thing. So those easily visible Grotesqueries? Turns out they aren't normal Grotesqueries after all. According to the analysis team, it seems like Gifts aren't as effective on them."

"...That's terrible. Is it the same with arts?"

"Looks like it. Evocation, sorcery, expulsion, exorcism, *onmyodo*—they've already tried various types of arts on the creatures, but none of those techniques did much damage."

Arts and Gifts were distinctly mediums.

Gifts depended on an individual's innate nature, but arts could be used by not just Gift-users but anyone with Spirit-Sight—or anyone with the power to sense otherworldly and inhuman presences, rather—given the proper study and training.

Arts could be used to create flying familiars and establish barriers, among other things, and while there were limitations and fluctuations in power based on the user's talents, to those with Spirit-Sight and Gift-users, they were the most fundamental, which they learned at the beginning of their training.

Many members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were arts

specialists who had mastered a variety of different arts, despite having no Gift of their own. Since they were also assisting with the analysis team's investigation, there was little room to doubt that both Gifts and arts were less effective on these Grotesqueries.

"Right now, they appear to only react to barrier arts, at least."

"Barriers..."

Despite the analysis team's findings, the Gifted Communion had used Gifts to destroy visible Grotesqueries during the incident on New Year's Day and other similar acts of propagandizing.

In other words, the Gifted Communion's Gifts would have an effect, but Kiyoka and his men's Gifts would be dampened.

Kiyoka massaged his brow.

This is a much bigger nuisance than those artificial Gift-users.

If the Gifted Communion turned these visible Grotesqueries against the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit in combat, Kiyoka and his men wouldn't have any means of fighting back. All they would be able to do in that situation was defend themselves with barriers.

If that happened, there was a high chance that his unit would be sent packing, and confidence in Gift-users would plummet.

They had to move faster with their research to figure out the trick behind these visible Grotesqueries, or they would be at a significant disadvantage.

At this point, the Gifted Communion sat in an unchallengeable position.

"Just tell them to speed up their investigation and analysis for now. Oh, and if they think they're on the verge of finding some way to fight against the resistant Grotesqueries, they should investigate that immediately," Kiyoka ordered.

"Got it. I'll let them know," Godou said.

After getting through several more work updates, he left the rearguard tent behind.

Right now, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit was divided into separate teams.

For example, each of the advanced guard and rearguard camps within the Imperial Palace had their own teams stationed there, and there was also a group patrolling the capital and cracking down on the Gifted Communion, as well as a team handling their usual duties at the station.

Although these groups could theoretically communicate with each other via flying familiar, they needed to frequently contact each other in person to make sure nothing was amiss. This was particularly important for the team stationed in the grounds of the Imperial Palace.

With the threat of Usui looming over them, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit couldn't overlook the slightest change or suspicion that something was off.

The advanced guard had set up camp near the first gate, and there was quite a distance between them and the rearguard and Takaihito's residence.

Kiyoka had ridden in a carriage to the residence when he'd been with Miyo, but he couldn't leisurely ride along in a carriage every time he went back and forth.

Instead, he made use of his superior physical abilities as a Gift-user to run straight through the grounds to the advanced guard camp.

"Good morning...Commander."

Kaoruko Jinnouchi stood in front of the advanced guard tent, waiting to receive Kiyoka.

The simple and innocent smile she'd worn in the past was gone, replaced by a shadow in her expression.

"...Good morning, Jinnouchi."

Kaoruko had been charged with betraying the military and had been taken off the team that would protect the Imperial Palace.

So why was she here now?

That was because she had requested a meeting with Kiyoka to convey something to him.

"All right, why don't you tell me over there?"

Kiyoka pointed to a small outdoor bench that was commonly used by the people working at the Imperial Palace.

There were accommodations inside the tent to sit and discuss things, but he couldn't allow her inside.

"Sit."

"...Yessir."

Kiyoka had Kaoruko sit by herself on the bench while he stood beside her. As a soldier, he needed to stay on guard when dealing with traitors.

I'm sure Miyo would dislike my behavior, though.

She had a bit of a tendency to be slightly too enthusiastic about her very first friend. While Kiyoka could understand her feelings on the subject, this was one thing he couldn't let slide.

Correctly understanding how she was being handled, Kaoruko looked up at Kiyoka and let out a dry chuckle.

"I'm sorry. I know how busy things are, and here I am having you make time on short notice to hear me out..."

"It's fine. You already talked to Major General Ookaito, right?"

"In a broad sense. But what I'm going to speak to you about is little more than my own shoddy speculation. I only told General Ookaito the facts."

Sure enough, she wanted to talk about the Gifted Communion. The military was keeping her alive in the hopes that she would share information on Usui's organization like this.

"First off, regarding my father..."

The impetus for her assisting the Gifted Communion in the first place. She had been tricked into believing her father, who ran a dojo in the old capital, had been taken hostage by the Gifted Communion.

"I didn't believe what Naoshi Usui told me at first. My father isn't a Gift-user, but his skills as a swordsman are unquestionable, so I didn't think he'd be taken hostage easily."

"But you couldn't get in touch with him, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

After Usui first reached out to her, Kaoruko had immediately requested the telephone switchboard operator to get in contact with her father so she could confirm his safety and see if Usui was telling the truth. Ultimately, though, she never received a reply.

"If the telephone wouldn't work, I thought I'd send a telegram. I sent a letter through the post, too. Nothing came from any of them..."

"Still, your father works as a military collaborator in the old capital, doesn't he? There must have been other times when you couldn't get in touch with him immediately."

In addition to operating his dojo, Kaoruko's father had been collaborating with the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit in the old capital, the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, for several decades already. He'd been scouted for his skills with the sword. It was conceivable that he'd be unable to be contacted for a long period of time now and again when he was called in to assist with a mission and agreed to help.

Kaoruko shook her head at Kiyoka's question.

"No, even then. My father would have told me before I came to the capital if he was going to be away from the house for an extended period of time. I asked the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit about it, too."

When she did, the answer she got was, "We haven't requested his help on our end."

"I contacted the neighbors around my family's home, too. They all told me they hadn't seen him at all since I left for the capital."

He had been away from home for several days, without having a job or mission. On top of that, he hadn't even contacted his daughter about his departure.

Considering how anxious she must have been about her father being kidnapped, along with being forced into cooperating with the Gifted Communion, Kaoruko had handled things with as much composure as possible.

“...I—I believed the Gifted Communion. With my father’s life potentially on the line, I had no choice but to believe them. I’m sure this just sounds like I’m making excuses, though.”

“No, you’re right. It was a natural judgment to make, given you did your due diligence to ascertain if they were telling the truth.”

In Kaoruko’s position, it was all she could’ve done. If her father really had been taken hostage, she could have put his life at risk by consulting with someone about it.

It sounds like Usui’s ability to delude others extends beyond just the power of his Gift.

Usui didn’t stop at distorting people’s senses with his Gift. Taking advantage of people’s psyches, their personal situations—he exploited everything he could to manipulate others. What a nasty way of doing things.

“But then, the hostage talk turned out to be a lie on Usui’s part, right?”

Kaoruko awkwardly dropped her eyes down to her feet.

“Yes. My father was safe... Apparently, he had gone away at the request of the military.”

It was hard to imagine the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had lied when answering her. Since that was where Kaoruko was originally stationed, she would have immediately realized if her fellow soldiers were lying.

In short, it was clear that Kaoruko’s father had been given a mission from someone outside the Second Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit.

“The written directive sent to my father was genuine, and his mission was truly urgent. Those kinds of jobs aren’t unusual for him.”

Kaoruko broke off for a moment and looked up at Kiyoka, holding back tears.

“So what exactly is the meaning of this, then? Why was a request sent by the military to my father right when it was most convenient for the Gifted Communion? Why...?”

Her voice tapered off and went quiet before she again cast her eyes to the ground.

Kaoruko herself likely had already imagined the answer to that question. Nevertheless, she didn’t want to believe it.

Kiyoka thoroughly understood her feelings.

“The Gifted Communion has wormed its way into the inner circles of the Empire.”

In as quiet and composed a tone as he could muster, he clearly vocalized the doubts in his subordinate’s mind.

He made this declaration without looking back down on Kaoruko sitting on the bench below him. Then a feebly whispered “that can’t be” reached his ears.

“There’s too many things that defy explanation if that isn’t the case. The upper ranks of either the government or the military, perhaps both, are connected to the Gifted Communion, and there are people aiding their cause.”

“But that means there’s no way we can stop them.”

“Let’s set aside the question of whether we can defeat them or not for now. We aren’t sure how many people have shifted their allegiance to the Gifted Communion at the moment. Though I will agree that this is the worst-case scenario.”

If members of the Gifted Communion had infiltrated the central government, it would be all too simple for them to send out genuine orders that would benefit them, just as had been done with Kaoruko’s father. They would also be able to manipulate information with ease.

And that was just the beginning. In a position as powerful as that, they could conceivably send overt support to the Gifted Union.

The enemy was steadily gaining power and growing formidable.

Enough to make Usui’s grand goal of overthrowing the government a conceivable reality.

“Just what have I done...?”

Kaoruko’s fists, clenched in her lap, trembled slightly.

She had invited Usui inside the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Station, and while Kiyoka was tied up by that threat, the emperor had fallen into the Gifted Communion’s hands.

It was certainly an unforgivable act of betrayal, but things would have ended up like this no matter what.

Usui likely could have coerced any of the unit members into cooperating with the Gifted Communion by making them believe their blood relatives were taken hostage. Kaoruko, having just arrived in the capital, simply proved an easy target for his deception.

The problem was how to proceed from here.

Right now, the Gifted Communion had both the authority of the reigning emperor and the influence on the government in their grasp. They could easily start a coup if they so pleased.

Their immediate goal was likely...

Stoking the populace’s distrust in the current state of the government and the military through Gifts and Grotesqueries to remake the current power structure.

And they were making steady progress to accomplish that.

Say, for example, that the Gifted Communion were able to sway a hundred new members to the fold through social maneuvering. That in and of itself may not have been cause for concern.

But what if every single one of those new members were able to become artificial Gift-users?

It would mean the instant birth of a hundred new Gift-users.

By increasing the amount of people who possessed Gifts, a power that could be used as a weapon, in such a manner, the Gifted Communion would be able to shift the power dynamics in the country overnight.

“At any rate, I understand what you’re saying. Don’t get close with any of the Gifted Communion from here on out. If they make any contact with you, then you better report it immediately.”

“Absolutely! I won’t ever waver again.”

Though she hadn’t been notified of this herself, Kaoruko was already being surveilled in secret. If she did try to connect with the Gifted Communion again, Ookaito would immediately be notified.

Their conversation was over. Kiyoka went to urge Kaoruko back to her post, but before he could, she spoke up with a slightly reticent “um.”

“What is it?”

He could see indecisiveness in her expression. She was wavering over saying something or not. Her eyes wandered to and fro, and she was clenching and unclenching her fists.

But Kiyoka didn’t have the time to indulge her indecisiveness.

“If you don’t have something to say, then—”

“No, I do! Um, it’s actually a personal matter and totally unrelated, but there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

Kaoruko raised her head, looking as though she had found her resolve.

Kiyoka would have fewer and fewer chances to speak with her going forward. She had been dispatched to fill in for Godou while he was wounded, but she had already been removed from the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit’s core group.

This could be his last chance to listen to whatever questions she had.

Kiyoka replied with a nod and indicated his approval.

“...A long time back, before I had been transferred to the old capital, you got an offer to marry me.”

“I did.”

“Is it all right for me to ask...why you rejected that offer?”

Kaoruko followed this question up with an apology for asking about this now, of all times. Kiyoka looked down at her for the first time that day.

He thought back several years ago, when he had rejected every marriage proposal that came his way.

As usual, his father Tadakiyo had learned about the offer somehow and brought it to Kiyoka’s attention. But how had he thought about it at the time?

He hadn’t, of course, had any romantic feelings for Kaoruko, despite

what Miyo had believed.

As for why, that was because...

"I wanted to prevent the slightest chance of letting personal feelings interfere with my work."

Kaoruko herself wasn't a bad person by any means, but she was simply his colleague, nothing more and nothing less.

However, it wasn't realistic to think that if they were married, established a home for themselves, and spent more and more time together, he wouldn't develop feelings for her.

He'd wanted to avoid bringing any familial emotions he might develop into the workplace, especially into a military one, which sometimes called for making rational and coldhearted decisions above all else.

"...R-right. Knowing what you're like, I had an inkling that something like that was the reason."

"I didn't have any problem with you specifically, or anything."

Thus, there's no need to lose confidence—the words Kiyoka tried to follow up with were interrupted by a shout from Kaoruko.

"In that case...! If I hadn't been working as a soldier, would you have accepted the offer?"

"Yeah. Most likely."

Kiyoka tried to reply as matter-of-factly as he could.

Last year, when he had been reunited with Kaoruko, who had arrived to fill the hole Godou had left behind—he had been convinced of feelings she had for him, though in truth, he had somewhat sensed them long before that.

It was because Kiyoka had watched Miyo.

When he watched her, he noticed the jealousy in Kaoruko's eyes when she looked at Miyo, and understood that it was caused by Kaoruko's affection for him.

He was fine with her having feelings for him.

But what if, just as Kaoruko had said, there had been some future where they had been married? He didn't believe he would end up feeling the same way for Kaoruko as he did for Miyo now.

"But I'm sure that it wouldn't have ultimately ended up as you wanted it to."

"...Ah."

"I can't say whether that would've ended up a good or bad thing for us, though."

There was only one reality. Worrying about hypotheticals wouldn't accomplish anything. The one thing Kiyoka understood was that right now, he had no regrets.

He said what he had to say. Kiyoka turned his back to Kaoruko sitting on the bench.

“Commander.”

The voice he heard from Kaoruko, contrary to his expectations, didn't have the slightest quiver to it.

Turning around after a brief moment of indecision, the woman who was once a marriage candidate and now his subordinate, flashed the same beaming and cheerful smile that she used to wear.

“Thank you very much for answering me.”

“Now that you're satisfied, return back to your post and do what you need to do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kiyoka swung around on his heels and turned his back on Kaoruko, for good this time.

 CHAPTER 3
Night

Within the palace furnished for the emperor on the imperial grounds was a room known as the Dianthus Room.

While the emperor resided deep in the palace grounds in a place known as the Inner Palace, the Front Chambers, which was connected by a corridor to the busy offices of the Ministry of the Imperial Household, was a public building used for rituals and ceremonies. It also functioned as a state hall, similar to those found in Western countries.

The Dianthus Room was located in the Front Chambers and mainly used to hold meetings attended by the emperor concerning national politics.

The interior of the chamber was mostly decorated in Western style, with an imported long table and chairs placed in the middle, and a chandelier set with crystal beads for illumination. However, the fabric used in the cloth on the ceilings and walls, the curtains, and the tablecloth itself, were woven with a traditional Japanese pattern, bringing the Western and Japanese influences together into a brilliant and sophisticated coexistence.

The seats of the table, which could fit more than fifty people, were completely occupied by men in suits. Dozens of additional chairs had been set up against the walls of the room, and these were also filled by officials.

Sitting at the table were the heads of each ministry, though not all of them were present, while sitting in the chairs on the walls in addition were those heading important positions within the military or government.

At the head of the table sat a raised tatami throne with a folding

screen at its back. In it sat Crown Prince Takaihito, who was currently serving as the emperor's substitute.

This was not an official state meeting.

It was a special gathering for central government officials to exchange opinions with one another, as well as bring questions to the acting emperor, Takaihito. Sessions of this kind had been held multiple times since the emperor disappeared from the seat of honor.

An hour had already come and gone since the meeting had gotten underway, but like usual, they had no major progress to show for it.

Amidst the stagnant air of eau de cologne and cigars, it had fallen into awful disorder.

"Would you please provide us with an appropriate explanation—and please pardon my rudeness—as to why you allowed outsiders into the Imperial Palace, in addition to exposing your august self to danger, Your Highness?"

Speaking up with enough vigor to lift himself out of his chair was one of the ministers of state.

For this latest meeting, Takaihito was the only member of the imperial family in attendance. Therefore, the address "Your Highness" indicated him and him alone, but for this question, one of the other ministers protested before he could answer.

"His Highness has explained this many times at this point. I'd suggest you choose your words a bit more tactfully."

"And I'll ask you to quit your caviling. My question was directed at His Highness."

"I'm saying that I don't believe you should be questioning His Highness with such impertinence."

"That's the exact caviling I'm ta—"

"If you both are going to bicker with each other like children, I ask you find another place to do so."

At the cold remark of Takakura, the young Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal and aide to Takaihito, the middle-aged ministers, caught in a truly pointless and stupid quarrel, both glared at the man and fell silent.

The main topics for discussion were how to handle the emperor's absence, and Takaihito's almost entirely arbitrary decision to allow the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit to set up camp within the Imperial Palace grounds.

In regards to the latter, the individuals gathered here today were largely split into three camps.

The first was the faction that agreed with Takaihito's decision. Then there was the group that opposed the decision, along with a collection of individuals who'd decided to calmly watch the other two confront each other. These were the three.

The group putting forward their objections to Takaihito's decision—specifically setting up military camps in the palace grounds and tightening its defenses—were led by the Minister of the Navy. Takakura led those who acknowledged Takaihito's abilities as the imperial heir apparent.

Thanks to the marvels of scientific advancement, there were already a fair number of ministers and bureaucrats who were skeptical of unscientific things like Gifts and Grotesqueries, including the Divine Revelation endowed to the emperor.

The accumulated disbelief was deepening the hostility and turmoil between these factions even further.

The Minister of the Navy represents everyone who holds esteem for science above all else.

Takaihito carefully looked down across the room.

The prime minister, leading all the ministers of state, protected his neutral position with a certain amount of distance from the conversation, and several others looked to be mimicking him.

“Lord Keeper Takakura, I'd ask you to keep your comments to a minimum. The role of the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal is to attend to affairs at His Majesty's side, not to comment on government matters, yes?”

The Minister of Education reclined against his chair back and voiced his opinion to Takakura while stroking his moustache, a smug grin on his face.

Takakura frowned at the man's framing, which made it clear that he looked down on the position of Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal.

“...I have no obligation to heed your own personal viewpoints, and I'll ask that you save voicing any additional problems irrelevant to the purpose of this meeting for another time.”

A smile came to the Minister of Education's lips as he looked sidelong at Takakura, who was maintaining as even a tone as he could.

“Being Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal at such a young age, and earning His Highness's trust, well, it's reasonable that it might make one a bit too proud.”

“.....”

“We cannot allow the grounds of the Imperial Palace to be treated like Your Highness's personal property, this latest decision of yours included. The Imperial Palace grounds are meant to be for His Majesty the emperor's purposes, and while you are indeed the crown prince, we cannot allow Your Highness to do whatever you please.”

The other officials who thought negatively of Takaihito's decree along with the Minister of Education, like the Minister of the Navy and the Minister of the Imperial Household, both voiced their

agreement with his opinion.

“Why, I myself am the Minister of the Imperial Household, and I wasn’t even consulted beforehand in regards to this latest development whatsoever. Saying that His Highness is treating the grounds like his personal property is absolutely the perfect way to describe it.”

The Minister of the Imperial Household sent a venomous look Takakura’s way.

Observing the atmosphere in the room, Takaihito let out a small sigh, thinking he may have gone a bit too far.

Waiting to use the opportunity provided by New Year’s, when the government’s activities lulled, he had forced through his plan to protect himself and Miyo Saimori simultaneously within the Imperial Palace grounds.

Although this resulted in the plan itself being successfully enacted, it also intensified backlash against him.

Takaihito would have liked to conscientiously get everyone’s approval beforehand if time permitted, but he couldn’t afford to be so laid-back.

As for the Minister of the Imperial Household, unlike Takakura, the man was a close adviser to the emperor. Therefore, as much command as he may have had over the Imperial Palace grounds, he wasn’t someone Takaihito could trust. He hadn’t planned on consulting with the minister from the start.

Takaihito could give the truth to him directly, but he wasn’t going to be convinced.

Furthermore, while Takaihito may have been performing duties in place of the sickly, bedridden emperor, he still lacked the authority of his father. Using the Imperial Palace grounds at his whims despite the lack of authority was likely another factor to the increased animosity.

What’s the right move here?

He couldn’t stand by and watch Takakura, who was young and widely opposed, bear the brunt of the officials’ criticisms.

Just as Takaihito thought this, the Minister of Finance raised his hand and began to speak.

“You both say as much, but His Majesty’s plan is very easy on the nation’s finances. If you wish to oppose it, I ask that you produce an alternative that also has light budgetary costs.”

The Minister of Finance pushed up his glasses before crossing his arms, a sour look on his face. The air was instantly sucked out of the room, and everyone went quiet.

Once the topic of money was brought into the equation, no one was able to object.

It was a development that had been repeated over and over during

the past hour.

“By the way, is there any explanation as to why our information control has gotten so lax?”

The question brought up by the Minister of Foreign Affairs prompted the shoulders of a lean middle-aged man, shrinking back in his seat at the corner of the table, to tremble.

That man was the Minister of Communications. He was the highest authority in the Department of Communications and Transportation, controlling all work involving the postal service and information transmission.

He wiped the cold sweat from his brow with a white handkerchief and stood up weakly.

“R-regarding our control of information... We are diligently investigating the facts of the matter at this time...”

“You’re still at the preliminary stages? A rather incompetent response, isn’t it?”

“I—I am ashamed to say...”

“I don’t need your apology.”

Decisively dealt with, the Minister of Communications sagged his shoulders in dismay and returned to his seat.

A superficial look at the situation would imply that the Minister of Communications was the one who could most easily manipulate information restrictions for the Gifted Communion’s benefit.

However, Takaihito simply couldn’t see the man as being capable of such a bold act of betrayal.

I am certain the inept response to the situation is a plain lack of competency on the man’s part, as well.

In which case, who was the traitor who was allying with the Gifted Communion?

Were they mixed in among the men gathered here? Or were they hidden away somewhere else?

At the present moment, a definitive judgment seemed impossible.

“I very clearly understand all your views on the matter.”

When Takaihito began to speak, everyone who had gathered turned their eyes on him.

“I apologize for neglecting to give you a detailed explanation of my policy and pushing it forward without your consent.”

Everyone revealed their confusion and trepidation as the imperial heir bowed lightly.

A natural reaction. Though he may not have ascended to the throne yet, the crown prince was still unmistakably a descendent of God to the lords assembled before him now that the emperor was absent.

Normally, a man of his station would have avoided bowing in apology to those merely tasked with giving him advice on

governmental matters. It was preposterous behavior, only barely able to be excused by the fact this wasn't an officially sanctioned meeting.

Yet Takaihito wanted their understanding, even if it meant contradicting custom. Takaihito's wholehearted intent to do so propelled him to this.

I constantly scorned my father as mediocre and banal, but I may be plunging straight down the path of a foolish ruler myself.

If he deprecated himself too much to the people, he would lose authority.

But he was at a crossroads. He needed to push through no matter what it took.

"I saw a possible future with my Divine Revelation. If I hadn't taken those measures on the grounds, I would have been assassinated forthwith."

"No..."

A bewildered hue came over the faces of everyone present; they couldn't believe their ears.

But Takaihito was speaking the truth.

He had seen a number of uncertain and intermittent visions of the future as of late.

In the worst of these visions, he lost his life, and Miyo Saimori fell into the Gifted Communion's hands. Following this, the Empire would be immediately overthrown.

He also saw a vision in which he was protected, but Miyo was stolen away, as well as a future where Miyo was protected, but he was assassinated.

In the former scenario, Miyo would be forced to obey the Gifted Communion and would use her Gift to bring the Empire into their hands, ultimately leading to Takaihito's death.

In the latter scenario, in which Takaihito was assassinated, the reigning emperor would regain actual power and become a puppet of the Gifted Communion. The Empire's steering wheel would pass completely into the Gifted Communion's hands, and Kiyoka and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit cooperating with him would protect Miyo, continuing to fight on alone, before ultimately being driven up against the wall, losing their lives.

Although he saw other futures with slightly different details, the outcomes of those were largely the same.

Thus, both he and Miyo would need to be protected. Yet because they were in separate locations, that meant one person would be defended at the expense of the other, or their protection would be spread equally thin.

Kiyoka Kudou was the key here—the place he could not defend would end up more vulnerable and be targeted in the event of an

attack.

Out of all our soldiers, it is likely Kiyoka who Naoshi Usui fears the most. Though others may be insignificant to him, he has grown wary of attacking anywhere under Kiyoka's protection.

While it would not have been strange for Usui to outwit Kiyoka with a Gift as powerful as his, Kiyoka's abilities were so strong that there was a chance the commander could turn the tables on Usui.

In light of that, Takaihito had decided to place both himself and Miyo within Kiyoka's reach.

As long as Kiyoka is in the Imperial Palace to protect us, we can hunker down like a snail curling up in its shell, forcing the Gifted Communion to avoid a direct confrontation with us.

Though this is merely conjecture, Takaihito added on a self-deprecating mental note.

Regardless, Usui wouldn't attack them directly; he would strike at them via some roundabout means instead. This increased the probability that they could arrive at the future Takaihito had his sights on, while risking comparatively little amount of harm.

The crown prince loudly snapped his fan and looked over the room.

"The defenses of the Imperial Palace will be strengthened—at present, this alone remains unchanged. We shall focus our defenses on a single location. Otherwise, we'll face death by a thousand cuts."

"Nevertheless, I do not believe we should be bending so many customs, all to deal with some newly risen religious cult."

The Minister of the Imperial Household was reluctant.

An unavoidable reaction. Preserving tranquility within the palace's borders was among his duties. Though Takaihito understood this, he couldn't cede any ground to the man.

The meeting continued for some time after that, but Takaihito had done what he'd come here to do, so his own perspective on the matter didn't yield a single inch.



After finishing her bath, Miyo put on her *haori* coat over her nightwear to stave off the cold and went over to Hazuki's room.

"It's Miyo."

"Come on in."

She opened the sliding door to find everyone that Hazuki had invited was here.

First was Hazuki herself, and then Yurie. In addition, and most startling, was Takaihito, sitting as naturally as ever in the back of the room.

"P-pardon me..."

Why was the crown prince in Hazuki's room? No, more pressingly, how was Miyo supposed to react in this situation?

"It's a lovely night, isn't it?" said Takaihito to her, his lips curled ever so slightly into a smile.

"Y-yes, it is. Er, um, g-good evening."

This had to be her first time exchanging words with Takaihito since he had asked about the full details regarding Kiyoka's collapse.

Although it may have been her second time talking to him, she didn't feel any more accustomed to it.

"Good evening."

His completely normal greeting only threw her into even further confusion.

Oh no, what am I supposed to do?!

Then Miyo remembered she was in her nightgown. Ashamed that she had committed an impolite blunder as a gentlewoman, she went red in the face.

"Don't worry, Miyo, okay? Don't freeze up, and come sit down."

Hazuki lightly tapped on the floor cushion near her.

"But..."

"Look, see, no one's worried about you being rude or anything, are they? C'mon, get over here."

Overwhelmed by Hazuki's assertion, she slowly entered the room and sat down on a cushion, her eyes cast slightly at the floor.

Hazuki checked to make sure all the seats in the room had been filled, and clearing her throat, began to speak.

"Now then, I have gathered us all here for one reason and one reason only. We've been given the wonderful chance to all live together under the same roof, so I thought we should have a nice fun chat, just between us girls. I'm calling it a ladies' soiree!"

A fun event, very characteristic of Hazuki. Or so Miyo began to convince herself, before she began to have doubts, despite knowing how rude that was deep down.

"A *ladies'* soiree...?"

There was clearly someone who was not a lady thrown into the mix. Though she agreed that his facial features were so beautifully sculpted it was hard to tell if he was a man or a woman. Still, there was no doubt that the term "lady" didn't quite fit him.

Hazuki turned her eyes to the person in question without answering Miyo. Yurie chortled while looking at Miyo.

As for Takaihito himself—

"Please feel free to talk as much as you would like. Do not pay me any mind. I shall make my heart into a woman's and exclusively focus on listening along. If that still would not suffice, you may refer to me as 'Takako,'" he stated, looking wholly unperturbed.

Why had Hazuki called Takaihito here, too, when she had called this a “ladies’ soiree”? And why had Takaihito agreed to participate? Takako? Making his heart a woman’s? Just what in the world did he mean?

Left with even more questions, Miyo fell silent, not even knowing what part of it she should follow up on first.

“In other words, she’s Princess Takako, okay? She said so herself, so feel free to call her that, it’s fine. We do have one more person joining us though.”

Miyo cocked her head.

There were no extra floor cushions, and all the women she was close with who could visit a place like this appeared to be gathered here already.

Hazuki then brought out the vanity the room had been furnished with.

“I just have put this on!”

She slapped some sort of talisman on the back of the mirror.

Then the mirror began to cloud. The polished and lucent glass quickly hazed white, until finally, it naturally started to return to its former luster, starting from the bottom up.

However, the mirror that had definitely been reflecting the interior of their room a few minutes prior was now reflecting an entirely different backdrop. In its center was a face Miyo knew very well.

“Huh, Kaoruko...?”

Kaoruko wasn’t in their room, yet her face was clearly reflected in the freshly unclouded mirror. Her cheeks were somewhat flushed, and her eyes were bleary.

“It’s our extra participant, Kaoruko. Wait, now hold on. Are you drinking already?”

Hazuki introduced the woman with a smile but widened her eyes when she realized something was amiss.

“Yes, this is Jinnouchi. I’m already drinking!”

There was a sake carafe and sake cup partially in frame on the other side of the mirror. To make matters worse, while her speech was fluid and unimpaired, it seemed that she was already quite drunk, stretching up straight and giving an exaggerated salute with her reply.

Is it okay for her to do this while on duty...? was Miyo’s first thought, but Kaoruko had likely received time off for the occasion.

In which case, that would mean she was in her room at the military barracks.

“Honestly. We haven’t even poured a drop yet!”

Miyo looked behind Hazuki, who was pouting, to find alcohol, snacks, and treats for the occasion.

Hazuki had to be planning on bringing them out once the

introductions were finished.

“Well, fine then. Anyway, Kaoruko Jinnouchi is joining, too. She’s unable to be here, so I sent out a familiar inviting her, and she replied with one of her own saying she wanted to join in. That’s why we’re using arts just to have her with us. Outside communication isn’t exactly the best idea since we’re in a barrier right now. But thanks to a good word on our behalf from Princess Takako here, we managed to get approval for it.”

Neither Hazuki nor Yurie seemed to be bothered in the slightest. Miyo, however, looked over at Takaihito in apprehension, feeling fidgety and restless.

While Kaoruko was wearing her military uniform, the front of her collar was slightly loose, and the hair she usually kept tied up tight was beginning to fray. On top of it all, perhaps because she was drunk, she didn’t seem to have noticed Takaihito’s presence, so she hadn’t even greeted him.

Though Miyo wasn’t one to talk because she was in her nightgown, a part of her was anxious that Kaoruko’s slightly unladylike behavior would offend Takaihito.

But maybe my fear is unfounded...

Takaihito didn’t reproach Kaoruko whatsoever, even wearing a smile on his face as Hazuki poured his cup.

It appeared she was safe to consider this as a causal and free-spirited get-together after all.

“Come now, Miyo, take this.”

Hazuki passed a glass to her that was filled to the brim with some sort of fruit juice.

“S-Sis, I should be the one pouring for you...”

“Please, it’s fine. I’m the hostess, aren’t I? Oh, right. You’re not allowed to have any alcohol, okay?”

Miyo didn’t care about not being allowed to drink, but she was confused about why she was the only one being treated this way. Hazuki picked up on her befuddlement, and her face suddenly grew serious.

“Kiyoka told me that whatever I do, I absolutely, *absolutely*, couldn’t give you any alcohol.”

“Kiyoka said that...?”

“Presumably because he doesn’t want anyone else to see his fiancée drunk. Sheesh, he may be my little brother, but he sure can drive me up the wall. By the way, I also informed Kiyoka about this ladies’ soiree of ours, but I didn’t mention anything about Princess Takako joining us.”

Hazuki shifted from exasperatedly shrugging her shoulders to flashing a devilish grin. At this, Takaihito also raised the corners of his

lips ever so slightly and nodded.

“If Kiyoka knew about this situation, he’d be positively crimson with rage, I’m sure. Honestly, I never would have expected him to become such an intolerant man the instant he was betrothed.”

Yurie nodded up and down in agreement at Takaihito’s words, while Kaoruko also slammed her cup down on the table, and with a strangely loud voice shouted, “You’re absolutely right!”

Miyo purposefully avoided asking why exactly Kiyoka would have turned red with rage.

“However, I have previously spoken with Kiyoka about wishing to speak with you, so I am sure he would not object,” Takaihito said, looking at Miyo as he fully enjoyed himself.

Then she remembered.

She had indeed been told that Takaihito had something to discuss with her, and that she should obey whatever directions he had for her.

Though, she had never once thought it would produce an incomprehensible situation like this.

Miyo suddenly felt like she was facing down a tremendously important moment. Her mind trembled.

“I simply wished to know more about your nature. You do not need to be so nervous.”

“O-okay.”

Despite the stateliness to Takaihito’s tone, it also had a hint of levity. Miyo felt like the unapproachable aura around him had weakened slightly.

She wasn’t very confident she could stop her nerves, but she agreed for the time being.

After this, Hazuki had Yurie hold her cup up to pour her a drink, before she then held up a cup of her own to pour some liquor into.

“Now let the ladies’ soiree begin!”

Everyone took a drink from their cups after Hazuki’s opening remarks.

Miyo sipped her fruit juice. Its taste was reminiscent of the drink she’d had when she first spoke with Takaihito.

Unsurprisingly, Hazuki chattered the most that night. The next most talkative was Kaoruko. From there it went Takaihito, Yurie, and finally Miyo.

Incidentally, it wasn’t that she didn’t talk at all, but that she simply didn’t possess the conversational skills she would need to jump into a conversation involving so many people at once.

“With all the girls together like this, we’ve got to talk about love, right?” Hazuki declared, her cheeks slightly flushed and in high spirits. Miyo recalled that she could handle her liquor well, so she didn’t think she had brought the topic up on a drunken whim.

“Love! Screw love!”

As soon as the words left Hazuki’s mouth, Kaoruko shouted as she laid her face on the table and burst into tears.

“Oh my, Kaoruko. What’s wrong, dear?”

Miyo instinctively panicked at Hazuki’s attempt to dig deeper.

Until just a little while ago, Miyo and Kaoruko had essentially been romantic rivals. It wasn’t difficult for her to imagine that any topic that involved Kaoruko’s love affairs would center around Kiyoka.

No one was going to feel great about carelessly touching on such a topic at a time like this, and it was sure to ruin the mood.

Hazuki must have surmised the general details of the situation. Miyo found it difficult to understand why she would purposefully pry into things that would kick up discord.

“S-Sis, I don’t think...”

Miyo was afraid to butt into the topic herself like this, but it had to be done. When she mustered up courage to try criticizing Hazuki, an intensely serious expression instantly came to Hazuki’s face, and she looked back at Miyo.

“Now, now, why don’t we let her say her piece? Kaoruko jumped into the topic on her own, after all.”

That may have been true, but Hazuki was still the one who had suggested they talk about love in the first place. Miyo withdrew her argument, still feeling unsatisfied with the situation.

While this was going on, Kaoruko let out sniffles as complaints spilled from her mouth.

“I mean, it’s not like I didn’t know from the beginning. I knew that the commander never saw me as anything more than a colleague... *Sniff*. And I mean, I didn’t think that there’d be anything between us at this point anyway, but...”

“Indeed, that must have been quite painful.”

Takaihito chimed in with tepid acknowledgment in response to Kaoruko’s drunken confession.

Her line that she “didn’t think that there’d be anything between us at this point” made Miyo’s chest pound as she sat listening nearby.

The origin of Kaoruko’s jealousy had surely been the remnants of her past love.

It was true that love and romance fettered a person’s heart for a long time. When she thought about that, she could no longer keep her own heart at peace.

“Miss Miyo?”

A voice came from right beside her. She knew without even looking who the voice belonged to. It was Yurie.

“Is something the matter?”

Yurie’s steady words ever so slightly diluted the disquieting

sensation spreading within Miyo's chest.

"No..."

However, Miyo had no intentions of revealing her own fears, doubts, and anxieties to anyone else.

It may have been a good idea to consult Yurie and Hazuki, with their wealth of life experiences. She understood this, yet Miyo couldn't clearly decide for herself what exactly, or how exactly, she should ask for their advice.

For starters, this was a problem concerning her own feelings and her relationship with Kiyoka. She felt bad about roping other people, family or otherwise, into worrying about such a thing.

Yurie smiled gently at Miyo as she swallowed her emotions.

"You really are a kind soul, Miss Miyo."

"What? No, I wouldn't say that."

She wasn't kind at all. She was simply cowardly. She couldn't take the first step forward herself. Miyo knew her own flaws very well.

However, Yurie shook her head in denial.

"No. You are always so very kind, Miss Miyo. I noticed this from the moment you first arrived at that house. You are always sympathizing with people and considering their feelings. I know it."

Was that really how it was?

From Miyo's perspective, it seemed like she was only ever thinking about herself. Always afraid of being hurt.

...How pathetic.

Even now, she was merely dragging out the conclusion because she didn't want to be hurt. Because she didn't want to hurt someone, she was harming herself in the process.

That was why she wished to restrict her feelings for Kiyoka to the simply warm and undefined emotions they were now.

Conversely, Kaoruko's own feelings, which she had confronted head-on, were such an honest and beautiful thing.

Because Miyo did nothing herself, it was impudent of her to even consider them romantic rivals. Not only could she not compete with Kaoruko, she couldn't even stand in the same ring with her. And after she had so conceitedly reasoned with Kaoruko previously.

Miyo rubbed her now lukewarm glass in her hands.

"...I—"

"I know many of Miss Miyo's best points. But the way you swallow the feelings in your heart like you're doing now may be as much of a shortcoming as it is a strength."

Miyo raised her head up at Yurie's gently spoken yet scathing analysis.

"Please, Miss Miyo. All I ask is that you do as you like. I will always be on your side, and I will try to do whatever I can to help.

“Do as I like...?”

“Yes. I won’t tell you to lay absolutely everything bare. I simply ask that you remember that you have people to rely on for support, like Hazuki and myself.”

Was it truly okay for Miyo to reveal her doubts? Was it okay to rely on others? She still questioned if now was the right time. Could she really prioritize her own feelings?

Kaoruko’s voice jumped into Miyo’s ears as she sunk into her thoughts.

“Ish fine! I’ll just live fwor work inshtead! No romansh for me!”

Her articulation finally beginning to falter, Kaoruko shouted and put her face on the table. Not long afterward, they heard her breathing settle into a gentle rhythm.

“Kaoruko? Hellooo? Oh my, she’s clearly fallen asleep on us, hasn’t she?”

Hazuki called out to her in front of the mirror and waved her hand, but Kaoruko showed no signs of waking. Very little time had passed since their ladies’ soiree had gotten underway, and yet Kaoruko’s presence had come and gone like a rolling thunderstorm.

Wearing an exasperated grin, Hazuki poured more drink for Takaihito.

“I swear. She goes off on her own, then she immediately falls asleep. Kaoruko was a little out of control, wasn’t she?”

“I am sure she had built up quite a bit of emotional strain.”

Bringing his cup up to his brightly flushed lips, Takaihito smiled as well.

“Um, I know it’s a bit late to ask, but... Is this really okay? To drink alcohol like this?”

Miyo threw out the question during a lull in the conversation.

It had been on her mind the whole time. This was supposed to be a state of high alert, where they were preparing to endure an attack from the Gifted Communion and Naoshi Usui. While this didn’t necessarily apply to anyone in this room because they weren’t in the military, what if they got so drunk that they couldn’t respond to an emergency and found themselves in a life-or-death situation?

“It’s fine,” Takaihito said in answer to Miyo’s question. “We need to relax every once in a while. Furthermore, Usui will not be coming to make his move right now.”

“...Does that mean you have seen when exactly he will mount his attack, then?”

Miyo couldn’t stop herself from following up Takaihito’s confident declaration with another question.

If he understood that Usui wouldn’t be mounting his attack right now, then was there any need for them to be staying here in the

palace?

She found herself sending a suspicious look in Takaihito's direction.

However, the crown prince took her suspicions in stride.

"I do not know the definite point in time he will come. However, there is no snow this evening, yes?"

"Snow?"

Although the snow that had fallen on New Year's Eve still lightly coated the ground, most of it had melted away in the days since. They hadn't suffered any inclement weather since the start of their stay, so the ground was almost entirely free of white.

That aside, what exactly was the common thread between the weather and the Gifted Communion's attack?

Miyo and Yurie exchanged puzzled glances while Hazuki calmly listened along.

"In my vision of the future, I saw a winter landscape where the snow was thick enough to bury a man's foot."

"A snowy landscape..."

Though it had taken a while, Miyo finally understood.

A snowy landscape—Takaihito didn't say anything definitive beyond that, but she surmised that in the future he witnessed, it had been snowing while the events they were dreading came to pass. Both coexisting simultaneously.

Miyo's attention naturally turned to the other side of the paper sliding screen.

There hadn't been many clouds in the sky that afternoon, and there were no signs of the weather turning worse. There wasn't any snow falling at the moment, either.

Prince Takaihito has seen that nothing will happen until an intense snowfall arrives, at the very least.

But a storm like that could come the next day, or the day after that.

Once the snow started falling, it would be too late to prepare, so she could understand why the Imperial Palace had already tightened up their defenses like this.

"My deepest apologies. It was thoughtless of me to ask that."

Miyo apologized, ashamed at being slow on the uptake.

"It's fine" was Takaihito's reply once again. "I am unable to predict every future, and even if I were, I would be unable to describe all of them to you. Forgive me for my incompetence."

"You're not incompetent at all."

It was said that Miyo could glimpse the future with her power of Dream Sight as well. However, she had never once done so, so it seemed impossible to her.

That was why Takaihito, who was actually able to divine the future and guide everyone, couldn't possibly be incompetent.

At Miyo's earnest declaration, what would count as a broad smile came to Takaihito's face for the first time.

"Is that so? Hearing you say that does bring me confidence."

"What's this? Did Miyo showing up make even the crown prince lose some confidence in himself?"

Takaihito replied to Hazuki's teasing with what seemed to be a delicate shake of his head.

"No... Though I do wonder whether or not I had had those types of human emotions. Perhaps I have been affected by His Majesty's sense of danger."

The reigning emperor feared the power of Dream Sight. This was because he saw its power to see both into the future and into the past as above that of Divine Revelation. As such, he'd crushed Sumi Usuba, the harbinger of a girl born with the Gift of Dream Sight.

Perhaps Takaihito had the same thoughts and felt the same emotions as his father.

"Though it is a possibility I would rather not contemplate."

"I don't know, I think it's fine that way. I thought you were more likable in the old days, when you were more expressive."

There was a heartfelt yearning for the past contained within Hazuki's earnest words.

"I wonder."

Wielding power was a difficult thing.

As long as one had it, no one would leave you to yourself, and if you couldn't defend yourself, there was a chance you'd be abused for nefarious means regardless of your own intentions.

Miyo possessed the power of Dream Sight, but as she was unable to protect her own person, she entrusted everything to Kiyoka.

Takaihito, on the other hand, stifled his heart to protect both himself and the things he needed to defend. He was so magnificent that Miyo couldn't possibly compare to him.

She could only feel pathetic at her incompetence, to the point where it depressed her.

"So, Miyo. We heard from Kaoruko, and now it's your turn to talk."

Hazuki cheerfully turned back to Miyo and lightened the mood of the room.

Miyo was flustered to suddenly be the focus of the conversation.

"T-talk? About me?"

"That's right. Kaoruko's drank herself to sleep at this point, so you're the only one who can give us some talk about love to go with our drinks here."

She was speechless. To think that her future sister-in-law would so flagrantly treat her romantic affairs as drinking entertainment.

And though it pained her to be unable to meet Hazuki's

expectations, Miyo didn't have anything that she could talk about... Or at least, she tried to decline the invitation, but...

"So how far have you gone with that silly younger brother of mine?"
...Hazuki got one over on her.

By "how far have you gone" did she mean...?

"H-h-how far have w-we gone? Um, I couldn't, no..."

Accidentally responding to Hazuki's comment, Miyo recalled the different episodes with Kiyoka that would answer the question and grew restless.

"You must've held hands, right? You've been hugging each other, too, right? From there, then..."

"No, um, that's not..."

She couldn't let Hazuki say anything more. Alarm bells were blaring in Miyo's head.

But she had had no hope of worming her way out of this.

Miyo's future sister-in-law gave her a look split three ways between amusement, beauty, and bawdiness, then giggled.

"Kissing, perhaps?"

Miyo thought she heard the explosion of a firecracker as her cheeks practically burst into flames.

"Oh my... For a stubborn, unsociable fuss, he's surprisingly bold, isn't he?"

Miyo could no longer look at Hazuki in the face of the woman's teasing. She covered her face with both hands and tilted her head down.

There was no doubt that Kiyoka's nose was itching right now.

"I see, it seems one cannot judge a book by its cover."

Curiously, Takaihito was also nodding in agreement. Yurie said, "My, my," with her hand placed up to her mouth. There was definitely a smile concealed underneath it.

"*Ho-ho-ho*, it's fine to be young and innocent, Miyo. We were all like that once. I promise."

"Indeed."

"Oh, yes, long ago."

The three all wore knowing looks.

It was there that Miyo suddenly realized.

Takaihito, in fact, had a wife and child of his own. If she recalled correctly, his wife was a daughter of a peer, nobly born, and their union had been established through a marriage proposal by the state and the imperial family.

Yurie and Hazuki needed no explanation.

Sensing that she had no way of subverting the situation in front of her, Miyo meekly accepted her fate.

As the four continued to eat, drink, and chat, the night grew late.

When Takaihito, whose daily schedule was planned down to the minute, took his leave, Kaoruko, who had awakened and sobered up, also terminated her art with sleepy eyes.

Miyo, Hazuki, and Yurie were now the only three left, and the room grew quiet.

The atmosphere felt both familiar yet different than usual, which was perhaps unavoidable given their location.

“Miyo... Is it all right if I ask you something?” Hazuki asked quietly as she cleaned up the scattered sake cups and bottles, plates, and other leftover items.

“Yes.”

“What do you think of Kiyoka?”

Miyo stopped in her tracks.

Her suspicions had been confirmed. It was clear that both Hazuki and Yurie had picked up on the fact that something had changed within her.

Assuming she wasn't being too full of herself, Miyo figured that Hazuki had set up this soiree because she had seen through the truth behind her distress.

Hazuki had undoubtedly done that to make Miyo feel more comfortable talking with them.

But...

Miyo simply couldn't bring herself to answer the question.

She knew herself.

She had always given the same answer when asked about Kiyoka in the past: He was her beloved fiancé, who she always wanted to be together with.

But now, she got the sense that merely vocalizing the word *beloved* would give her answer a different tone.

So Miyo tried to skirt the question.

“Kiyoka is very important to me. I'd like to spend the rest of my days at his side, if he would allow it... That's what I think.”

“Miyo.”

She couldn't look Hazuki in the eye. The woman's gaze was serious, without a hint of frivolity, as if to say that Miyo hadn't actually answered the question.

She felt guilty.

Miyo had glossed over the question and hidden her feelings despite understanding what Hazuki was asking.

“If you don't want to answer, then I promise you don't have to. I'm not forcing you. But, what exactly is making you so stubborn on this point, I wonder? There's nothing to think twice about, is there? No matter what your feelings may be, I'm sure Kiyoka will accept them.”

“It’s just that...”

She was scared.

Terrified that these feelings might change something. Miyo was only growing happier and happier, and she was scared this might bring misfortune to someone else.

It wasn’t something she could easily confess, even when told she was being cowardly.

If things continued as they were currently, she and Kiyoka would become husband and wife before long. They would be able to be together. Miyo couldn’t possibly wish for anything more than that. Despite that, was there any reason for her to make her feelings clear?

Her breath caught.

There was a sharp pain inside her nose, and her heart was a mire as she floundered over what to do.

“I don’t... I don’t want things to change.”

When someone loved a person, they could end up shutting out everyone else. Like her stepmother, who was obsessed with her father.

Simple affection, on the other hand, could be given to many people.

For instance, Miyo cared about all the people around her who had shown her kindness. She held gentle feelings of affections for Hazuki and Yurie, as well as Arata and his father.

But romantic feelings were different.

Desire was like a bright flame, intense enough to devour all other emotions in its fires.

She had never wanted to become like the Saimori family. Yet despite her feelings, there was no guarantee she wouldn’t.

Once she put these feelings into words...they would go out of control. It would be tantamount to begging Kiyoka to look at her and her alone.

Just imagining it made a shiver run down her spine.

“Miyo...”

“If I’m able to quietly live together with Kiyoka forever and ever, that alone is enough to make me happy. We don’t need to have feelings reserved for just the two of us.”

Both her vision and voice wavered. Lukewarm teardrops welled up and spilled from her eyes.

Hazuki gently wrapped her arms around her. Miyo buried her head in Hazuki’s chest and wept.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to upset you... You’re right. It is scary, isn’t it?” Hazuki said.

More tears welled forth as Miyo felt Hazuki lovingly pet her head.

Just then, events from her life flashed before her eyes, and she grew increasingly unable to voice her feelings.

The envy Miyo had felt toward Kaoruko, the jealousy Kaoruko had

directed at her, made Miyo come back to her senses.

No matter how many memories of her old home she recalled, no matter how hard she rallied against becoming like what she saw there, she realized that she was threatening to do the same thing herself.

How could Miyo possibly say she wouldn't bring anyone harm, all the while being stirred by her own jealousy as she haughtily admonished her romantic rival?

If things stopped at mere affection, no one would be hurt at all. Even if that meant she would feel lonely occasionally, she didn't want to monopolize someone for herself.

That was why preventing her emotions from going beyond affection and reverence—familial love—would have been better.

Miyo wanted to go back to when she wasn't lost and troubled, to a time before she became aware of the feelings that threatened to burst from her chest even now.

I was a fool. If I had never known, I wouldn't have been able to say anything.

She lowered her tear-filled eyes and suppressed a sob.

In truth, Miyo had no right to weep. There were so many other women who had longed to stand by Kiyoka's side.

"I'm... I'm sorry...for crying all of a sudden," Miyo said, trying to hold back her heaving sobs.

Hazuki's question was justified. Miyo was being half-hearted and indecisive, so it was obvious that a friendly and considerate woman like Kiyoka's sister would be concerned.

Miyo had nothing to say for herself; Hazuki should have scolded her for avoiding her question.

Yet Hazuki shook her head at Miyo's apology.

"Don't be. I should be apologizing. I stuck my nose too far into your personal business. I was too hasty. But let me just say one thing."

"Yes?"

Sensing the earnestness in Hazuki's slightly lowered tone, Miyo looked up at her face with her tear-drenched eyes.

"It's up to you whether you tell Kiyoka your feelings or not. But I think between making your feelings clear and regretting it afterward, and keeping your feelings unspoken and regretting it afterward, the latter of the two situations will hurt the most."

"....."

"I speak from experience, since I'm in the latter camp myself. I missed my opportunity to make my feelings known, and then there was nothing else I could do. Though I guess you could say I'm just being stubborn."

Miyo felt a pain in her chest seeing Hazuki's slightly lonesome expression.

“Hurting others is a scary thing, isn’t it? In that case...what if you think about it like this—you think that if you maintain the status quo, you’ll be able to get by without hurting anyone, right?”

Miyo couldn’t answer that. This must have been what it was like to be unable to voice your true feelings.

Taking Miyo’s silence as an agreement, Hazuki continued.

“I’ll admit that if your heart was yours and yours alone, that may be true. But I know one person who would be hurt if you kept your honest feelings locked inside.”

“Huh?”

Miyo’s eyes, unconsciously widened in pure disbelief, reflected Hazuki’s smile.

“Wouldn’t your fiancé who loves you be hurt by that?”

“Ah...”

Kiyoka’s smile flashed in the back of her mind.

He would be hurt if she kept her feelings to herself—she definitely wouldn’t have believed it when they had first met each other.

Thinking back now though, the only images that came to her mind were of her fiancé always showing her extra-special care.

Was it really okay for Miyo to believe that she was special to him? Just as he had become special to her?

What did Kiyoka want? Would he really be hurt if Miyo kept the depths of her heart a secret?

I don’t know. But...

Before she knew it, her tears had stopped.

“Please...give me some time to think.”

Hazuki broke into a smile of relief at Miyo’s response.

“Oh yes, of course. Give it as much thought as you need and find the path that’ll make you happy, okay? Yurie and I will back you up, right?” Hazuki said, and Yurie smiled and nodded back as well.

Miyo felt so blessed.

She had been too distressed to do anything. Yet she had people who would happily support her like this. This alone almost made her happier than she could bear. Miyo reflected on the warmth sprouting forth from inside her chest.



The clear winter sky shifted from orange to violet at twilight, and the air grew cold enough to freeze the ground.

The sun was setting on the fifth day since Miyo and others had begun living in the Imperial Palace.

Beneath the fully darkened wintry sky, Miyo was saying her farewells to Kiyoka before he went back to work.

He would take some time to visit Miyo every day. The timing always varied, but today they had been able to enjoy a slightly early dinner together.

Although she did enjoy these moments of relief, where she could see he was in good health, they didn't alleviate her anxieties.

"Are you holding up okay, Kiyoka?"

"No issues here. You don't have to check in with me every day..."

Kiyoka gave a slightly strained smile as he responded to a question he'd heard many times already.

"But I'm worried."

Kiyoka and his men were standing on the frontlines to protect Miyo and Takaihito, and there was a growing number of voices expressing distrust of the military and government throughout the Empire.

It must have been quite the physical and mental strain to stand guard against the Gifted Communion while facing criticism from the press day in and day out.

Telling her not to worry was the unreasonable thing here.

Miyo gently placed the scarf in her hands around Kiyoka's neck.

He gazed at her in slight awe and placed his hand up to it before he softened his gaze and smiled.

"Gift-users have harder bodies than normal people. This much is nothing."

"No matter how powerful Gift-users are, they can still be harmed."

Gift-users weren't completely emotionless, and they weren't invincible.

Staying on alert day and night and facing people's criticism was mentally and emotionally exhausting. If Kiyoka was injured on duty, it could lead to his death.

A slight amount of mental and physical fatigue alone was all it took to degrade one's health.

"I don't ever want to see you collapse again."

"I did that?"

Miyo looked up at Kiyoka and pouted, annoyed that he was playing dumb.

"You definitely fell. Did you forget already?"

"I was joking."

Laughing at Miyo's annoyed objections, Kiyoka returned to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit camp.

The image of him collapsed and unconscious came back into her mind. She would never forget the terror she had felt and the tears she had shed when Kiyoka had protected a subordinate and didn't wake up.

The horror of losing someone precious. Having lost her own mother very early in her life, it was the first time Miyo had tasted that awful

fear.

When she was living back in the Saimoris' home, she had felt a feeling of loss tear open her heart when Hana left, but the terror of seeing her fiancé potentially lose his life right in front of her was incomparable.

No, right now, it'd be even worse..., she thought, staring at the spot where Kiyoka had disappeared from view.

Now that her feelings had developed and blossomed, if she did end up in a situation where she lost Kiyoka, she couldn't imagine what would happen to her.

Nevertheless, she could foresee that the results wouldn't be anything good.

Because after all the pain and sadness that came with losing the person she loved and who loved her back, she would be alone.

"Miyo, come inside quick or you'll freeze."

"Arata..."

Her cousin called to her, poking his head out from the entryway door.

Just what sort of expression had she been wearing when she turned around? Arata was slightly taken aback when he met her eyes.

After a small sigh, his tranquil smile returned as he approached her.

"You don't have to worry so much. Commander Kudou will be fine."

"Kiyoka told me the same thing."

"I'm sure he did. I'd say there's close to no one in the world who's a match for the commander."

"But that won't necessarily hold true...for that man, Naoshi Usui, right?"

The Gifts of the Usuba and their branch family, the Usuis, were effective against Gift-users. Kiyoka was no exception, no matter how powerful he may have been.

On top of that, Usui's Gift was particularly strong, even compared to the other Usuba and Usui Gifts. There was no guarantee that Kiyoka would come out unscathed if he crossed paths with Usui.

Miyo knew that fact very well, since she had learned much about the Usuba gifts.

Arata looked down at Miyo with a quiet stare. The color that came to his pupils melded with the darkness of night, so she couldn't see them clearly.

"Maybe so, maybe not."

"What?"

It was a vague answer. Not very characteristic of Arata.

"Did you know that Gifts will sometimes get stronger or weaker depending on the strength of one's thoughts?"

"What do you mean?"

It was a topic that hadn't come up in any of Arata's lectures until now. Not only that, but the "strength of one's thoughts" was still an awfully ambiguous concept.

Arata winced slightly and shrugged.

"It's something I heard can happen on occasion is all. At the very least, I've felt the power of my thoughts effect the strength of my Gift."

It sounded like this phenomenon hadn't been explored much.

Though now that Miyo thought about it, her Gift had manifested out of her wholehearted desire to save Kiyoka.

"But you're saying it's possible, then?" she asked.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have given her such a vague answer.

"...I do wonder. Part of me wants it to be that way, but another part wants it to not be true. If that actually was the case—"

Arata broke off for a minute and let out a small sigh.

"If that were true, I feel like things would've ended up differently."

Miyo looked up at Arata, confused by what he meant. However, he didn't elaborate any further.

As they continued to chat, the curtain of night visibly came down from the east, and stars faintly began to twinkle in the deep blue sky.

The garden was still bright, illuminated in the reddish orange of the evening sun. Conversely, the small, evergreen-flanked road that extended from the front of the entryway to the main road, which went on to imperial residences and governmental buildings, had gone completely dark. The blackness was so intense it seemed to threaten to swallow one whole.

The sound of an engine broke the silence between them.

From the other end of the darkened road, a dazzling artificial light gradually approached, dimly swaying as it went.

"Oh... Whose automobile is that?"

The vehicle dug into the gravel and slowly passed through the small road, drawing closer to them.

Miyo couldn't see who was through the darkness.

The automobile passed in front of Miyo and Arata at an outright leisurely pace. Miyo thought it may have been Kiyoka's, but the shape was slightly different. Then she suspected that it belonged to someone else she knew, but no one came to mind.

"That's probably one of the ministers' official cars."

"The ministers..."

"If memory serves, I believe they were holding a meeting in the Front Chambers that Prince Takaihito was attending."

Even then, it was strange. The public Front Chambers, the emperor's personal residence in the Inner Palace, and Takaihito's residence were far from each other, and officials wouldn't need to pass through here

to get to the Imperial Palace entrance, which was in the opposite direction.

Right as Miyo and Arata started to grow wary, the suspicious automobile parked, and two men dressed in suits came out.

One was a plump, bearded middle-aged man, whose well-tailored three-piece suit evinced his wealth. The other was a younger man of medium build in his thirties, whose face lacked any distinctive features. While he also wore a high-quality outfit, it was inferior to the one of the man beside him.

“Good evening and pardon our intrusion. The Imperial Palace is just so very sprawling and vast, so we’ve gotten a bit lost.”

The younger of the two spoke up with a radiant smile.

Arata immediately pushed Miyo behind him and addressed the two men.

“Forgive me, but might you be the Minister of Education and his secretary? May I ask what business you have at Prince Takaihito’s personal residence?”

“Like I said, we’ve lost our way, so we thought we’d ask for directions.”

The younger man—the Minister of Education’s secretary—replied without the slightest apology.

Even Miyo could tell his excuse was a flat-out lie. There was no way a minister and his secretary would get lost after attending so many meetings that would have brought them to the Imperial Palace since the New Year.

Is there any chance they’re here for me...?

Though Miyo knew she couldn’t show fear, now that it occurred to her that she could very well be attacked at any moment, the blood drained from her fingertips and her hands began to go cold.

Kiyoka had already returned to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit camp.

However, these two would have needed to pass the camp to get here from the emperor’s residence, so it wouldn’t be long before Kiyoka’s unit realized what was going on.

“You lost your way? Ridiculous.”

“We just took a wrong turn at a corner. Anyone could make that sort of mistake, wouldn’t you agree?”

The secretary wasn’t bothered at all by Arata’s stinging accusation.

The Minister of Education made no attempt to caution his secretary, and gave a chuckling snort after leering at Miyo and Arata.

“...*Hmph*. I was hoping to see the Gift-user who His Highness insisted on protecting, but all I see here are a whelp and a meager girl.”

By now, Miyo and Arata wouldn’t stoop to getting worked up over

his contempt.

However, the sight of the minister stroking his beard as he spoke was so haughty and overbearing that it soured Miyo's mood.

"Then there's no need to go out of your way to see this whelp and girl, is there, my good sir? If you make your way back to the road you took to get here, you'll be able to head right on your way."

Both the minister and his secretary furrowed their brows in displeasure at Arata's offensively obsequious statement.

"It seems you don't know how to talk to your superiors, boy. You're a lost cause."

"Be that as it may, I am afraid that currently, as the minister is assuredly aware, we are under a state of high alert. We need to be wary of you, my good sir, as we do everyone else. There are no exceptions."

Arata further rebuffed the minister in a calm tone that suppressed his anger, but this seemed to offend him even further.

"If you're so wary of powerless people such as ourselves, then perhaps you Gift-users aren't so impressive after all. You talk big about these Gifts of yours, but you actually can't use any sort of supernatural powers at all, can you? No wonder then you're cowering in fear like baby rabbits."

Blunt provocation.

Should a person tasked as a governmental minister of an entire country really be allowed to speak and act like this?

Up until now, Miyo had seen many people around her—Kiyoka, Takaihito, or the Usubas—live noble lives and make sacrifices for their roles and responsibilities.

Compared to them, the minister didn't seem to deserve to be in a position of such great responsibility.

Miyo noticed a twinge of disgust and disappointment beneath her fear and anger.

"...Please leave."

Arata gave a direct answer, no longer feeling the need to go along with the man's questions.

"Minister, sir, perhaps these two do not in fact possess any kind of Gift. That would explain why they are trying so desperately to turn us away. There is something shady going on here, that's for sure."

"*Hah-hah-hah*. Good point. If you both claim to be Gift-users who deserve esteem and respect, then go ahead and show me some proof. You can do that, can't you?"

No one ever once expected any esteem or respect.

Miyo and Takaihito were being protected because the Gifted Communion was targeting them, not because of some expectation that Gift-users should be treasured and held above others.

If the minister, actively taking part in governing the country, truly meant what he was saying, then this wasn't a case of mere ignorance.

Too bewildered to respond, Miyo looked up at Arata.

"You can provoke us all you like, but we won't go along with your challenge. It's entirely meaningless, and it's likely to be to our own detriment."

Arata was evidently annoyed by the pair's remarks.

However, it would be the height of foolishness to actually use his Gift right here, in Takaihito's residence, and cause a scene.

While Miyo didn't know what circumstances may have been at play, there was no question that the two men trying to provoke them into using their Gifts were the ridiculous ones here.

"You cheeky little..."

Right as the Minister hurled his insults as if recoiling from Arata, there was suddenly the sound of engines and tires on gravel, along with signs that a large group of people were approaching.

"Minister of Education Hasebe! What are you doing?" a man in a suit shouted, his face distorted in anger as he leapt from an automobile coming to a sudden halt.

Miyo unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief.

That's Mr. Takakura, isn't it...?

She had been briefly introduced to him the day that that she started living in the Imperial Palace. According to Kiyoka, Takakura was unlike the other officials who came to the palace grounds and had earned Takaihito's trust. He would act as their ally.

Miyo could see the Minister of the Imperial Household and his chamberlains following behind Takakura.

Further behind them were members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, though Kiyoka was not among them, with Godou at the lead instead.

"Whatever do you mean? This is very rude of you, wouldn't you say, Lord Keeper Takakura?"

"Manners have nothing to do with this. Though you are a minister, under the current circumstances, I ask you to refrain from acting out of line within the Imperial Palace grounds."

"'Out of line' you say? Don't you order me around!"

The Minister of Education raised his voice. Then he scowled at Miyo and Arata with piercing eyes.

"Besides! You acted out of line by inviting these charlatans into the Imperial Palace without permission in the damn first place!"

"I approached the others about the arrangements."

"I didn't give my approval!"

The Minister of Education threatened to lose his temper at Takakura's counterargument, but then his secretary, of all people,

jumped in to stop him.

“Now, now, sir. We’ll only have more problems to deal with if you make a bigger fuss, so please bear with it for now.”

As the secretary openly tried to stop his boss like he was a soothing a horse, Miyo felt as though his eyes met hers for a brief moment.

What...?

It made her shoulders tremble slightly. She felt like he had glared at her. Had that just been her imagination?

“Miyo. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no.”

Miyo shook her head at her cousin as he turned back to her, looking worried.

Since things had dissolved into an argument, the secretary must have been on edge as well. As it was, Miyo and Arata were both Usubas, and the harsh criticism they faced was more intense than other Gift-users.

On top of that, the Minister of Education seemed fundamentally dismissive of Gift-users, and given the way the secretary also spoke and acted, he might have hated them as well. In which case, there wasn’t much she could do about being glared at like this.

“Please, allow me to apologize. The wrong turn we took ended up causing quite a bit of commotion.”

The secretary impudently turned to Arata as though nothing had happened, in spite of how much he had riled up the minister.

“I don’t need your half-hearted apologies. Go back the way you came as soon as possible.”

“Oh my. I certainly understand why you’d be upset, but please forgive us,” the secretary said as he approached Arata with excessive familiarity and tapped him on the shoulder. He clearly wasn’t actually sorry, so Miyo could understand Arata’s grimace.

As the two passed each other, the secretary whispered something.

“Don’t forget your role here.”

Arata widened his eyes in surprise for a moment, before he bit down on his lip.

The faint whisper disappeared before it could reach anyone else’s ears, and Miyo had no way of knowing the substance of his comment.

The secretary and minister returned to their automobile as the crowd who had gathered glared at them in annoyance.

“Sorry for not coming sooner. Are you all right, Miyo?”

Godou approached them with an apologetic look.

“Oh, Godou... I’m fine.”

Arata had protected her, and she hadn’t been at risk of being harmed.

“Thank goodness,” Godou replied, a wholehearted look of relief on

his face. "We were notified right after the commander departed for the advance guard. He should have gotten the report on the situation by now, so I'm sure he'll come here soon, but... I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Thank you. I'm sorry for troubling you all with this."

When Miyo bowed in apology, Arata looked strangely cross and a cold smile came to his face.

"You don't need to apologize, Miyo. This is clearly a failure on their part. While it didn't seem to be the case with the minister and his secretary, if they had indeed been Usui in disguise, it would have been far too late by the time Godou and his men arrived."

"Yes, well... You're absolutely right..."

As they spoke, the engine of the minister and secretary's automobile roared, and they drove off.

Then Takakura came over to join them, dejection visible on his intellectual features.

"You have my deepest apologies for the trouble they caused you."

"There was no harm this time, but I would ask that this sort of thing doesn't happen again... I do understand that you're in a difficult position, but still."

Arata was equally stern with Takakura.

While Miyo didn't know the particulars, it appeared the government wasn't a monolith, either.

Evidently, some officials didn't trust Takaihiito acting in the emperor's stead. They also had doubts about the current status quo, where everything was decided by someone wielding the power of Divine Revelation, which was incomprehensible to the average person.

Takaihiito had battled against these forces the whole time he had been acting as the emperor's representative, but it seemed that his invitation of Miyo and company into the Imperial Palace had caused the discontent and suspicions against him to boil over.

Miyo assumed that the Minister of Education was one of the people who was dissatisfied with the way things were.

"But of course. I swear on my name as Prince Takaihiito's aide that I will work to ensure it doesn't happen again."

"Please do."

Ultimately, Miyo failed to understand what exactly the minister and his secretary had come there to do.

However, that was more than enough to make her worried about whether or not she would be able to spend the next ten days there in peace.

"...Just what did those two men come here for, anyway?" Miyo muttered, cocking her head.

Their excuse about getting lost was absurd, so they must have come here for a different reason.

“Who knows. I can’t say for sure, but maybe they wanted to come check on us or something.”

“Wh-why would they go out of their way to do that?”

“Clearly, the government’s got too much time on their hands.”

Arata’s tone was cynical and biting.

Something is off.

Although his mouth was formed into his usual gentle and friendly smile, Arata was acting very uncharacteristically. His words carried a strange aggression.

“Arata.”

“What is it, Miyo?”

When she addressed him, she was met with the same temperament her cousin always had, free of any spite.

Still, she had felt like something was off the whole time. She needed to figure things out for herself.

“Um, are you...all right?”

A clever, tactful question didn’t come to her.

What was she supposed to ask him, and what did she need to ask to get Arata to answer her truthfully? Unable to instantly come up with the right question, she was disappointed in herself for landing on a terribly vague way of questioning him.

“I’m not exactly sure what you are referring to, but I’m just fine.”

“Um, no, well. That’s not it.”

“It’s not?”

“Is something bothering you? Or are you worried about something?”

A tiny chuckle escaped from Arata’s lips as she stammered and avoided looking him in the eye.

“*Hah-hah.* There’s nothing to worry about. Oh, but I am facing a problem, though.”

“Huh?!”

Miyo looked up in an instant, hopeful that he would actually confide in her.

However, things wouldn’t be that easy with this cousin of hers, skillful at keeping up appearances and playing things off as he was.

“You’re quick to get yourself involved in all sorts of trouble, so I can’t let you out of my sight for the slightest moment.”

That wasn’t what she was asking about at all. Nevertheless, she couldn’t deny that his observation was on the mark.

Miyo was conscious of the fact that she was regularly causing not only her fiancé Kiyoka to worry on her behalf, but also her cousin Arata.

“It’s just...”

His low murmur spilled down to her from above.

“I won’t be able to protect you forever, either.”

His melancholic and forlorn words cut deep.

She gave it some more thought and realized his statement made perfect sense. While they were relatives, she wasn't even living together with Arata, so she couldn't expect him to be her bodyguard for life, nor was it really necessary.

It was an extremely obvious statement. *So why does it bother me so much?* Miyo wondered.

"Arata...?"

"But even if I'm not around, with how you are now, you might be fine regardless."

"That's not true..."

It was totally unbelievable. If she really would be just fine, then Kiyoka wouldn't have purposefully placed Arata, someone he was still somewhat leery of, at her side.

With an assertive connotation in his words, Arata continued without looking back at Miyo.

"You've gotten quite strong. And you have Commander Kudou with you."

"Please, I'm not strong at all."

"You definitely are. That's why I'm sure that in the not-too-distant future, we'll no longer be spending time together like this anymore."

Even though he was right by her side, Arata seemed terribly far away.

They were conversing with each other, and yet she felt like nothing she said was resonating with him right now. She hadn't the slightest idea as to why.

"I'm sorry. I've gone and caused you trouble."

Miyo found it too difficult to pick up on Arata's true intentions as he collected himself and gave a strained smile.

"Not at all... As long as you're all right," she said.

"I'm just the same as always. Though, I did seem to let myself get quite irritated back there," he admitted.

She couldn't parse Arata's true feelings. And it felt as though she would be pushed away if she even tried.



Miyo was confused.

Or rather, it was more accurate to say she was too dumbfounded to make sense of things.

"...Was my bedding always set up like this...?"

A large bedding set had been neatly laid out in front of Miyo and Kiyoka—but for some reason, there were two pillows enthroned side by side at the head of the mattresses, their presence abnormally

imposing.

“Well, I don’t know. If you’re not normally using two pillows at night, then it must have changed, right?” Kiyoka said from beside her, similarly flummoxed.

A few hours had passed since that evening’s incident.

After things settled down, Kiyoka arrived, completely out of breath, and confirmed over and over again that nothing was out of the ordinary. Even after Miyo assured him repeatedly that there wasn’t any problem, he wouldn’t listen to a word she said.

“Miyo! Are you all right? Did they do anything strange to you? The moment I heard that something bad had happened to you, I was beside myself with worry...”

Hazuki had kept repeating “thank goodness,” over and over again, though the tears had probably been unnecessary. This worried Yurie, and soon a terrible uproar developed.

On top of this, Hazuki and Yurie had harshly instructed Kiyoka to stay behind in Takaihito’s residence for the time being out of worry for Miyo. They were both given strict orders to relax together.

Kiyoka had been working nonstop these past few days. He’d essentially been camping out, sleeping in a tent beneath the winter sky, so he was understandably exhausted.

It was a natural course of events to invite him to take it easy and relax, under the pretext of guarding Miyo.

Th-there wasn’t anything strange about it...right?

Hazuki and Yurie had insisted that Kiyoka should relax and unwind a bit, but that was nothing new.

Both Kiyoka and Miyo normally found it difficult to decline the pair’s proposals, and were pressured into relenting, so nothing about it should have felt unnatural.

However, for some reason or another...

By the time Kiyoka escorted Miyo from the bath to her designated room, the interior had been perfectly cleaned up and magically transformed into its current state.

Of course, this wasn’t the first time her room had been struck by this sort of unnatural phenomenon.

Arata disappeared without a trace at some point, too...

Now he was nowhere to be found, even though he had guarded her right up until she had entered the bath. Additionally, she couldn’t feel Yurie’s presence in the half of the room partitioned by the sliding door for her to use.

Miyo couldn’t help feeling a strange sense of déjà vu at the scene before them.

“We’ve been set up.”

“...I—I thought so.”

It seemed impossible to wave this off as just happenstance.

However, Hazuki and Yurie had earnestly confronted the troubles weighing on Miyo's mind, and were supposed to have understood her feelings, so it was difficult for her to think they would make such a forceful move.

Not only that, but they had only told her to relax together with Kiyoka, not hint that they should sleep together.

That begged the question—who had set this up?

"This...doesn't seem like my sister's doing. Despite how she may look, she's still a gentlewoman in her twenties. She wouldn't act this vulgarly. Which just leaves Prince Takaihito, then," Kiyoka coarsely declared, shaking his head wearily.

This is almost the exact same situation we faced in the Kudou villa, isn't it...?

However, there was one thing different this time.

"*Haah*. If this is Prince Takaihito's doing, then I won't be able to get him to prepare a separate room for me, will I?"

This wasn't the Kudous' estate, but another person's home, and everything rested in Takaihito's hands. In other words, even if they asked him to provide separate rooms, he could decide to refuse them.

The situation was dire, and Miyo and Kiyoka had essentially lost all means of taking control of the situation.

"Seriously, just where in the world did they get bedding this big in the first place?"

"....."

"Sounds nice and all to say he's being considerate...but is this really something a full-grown man, and a crown prince at that, should be doing?"

Kiyoka pressed on his forehead, his somewhat verbose statement showing his utter amazement.

Conversely, Miyo could only stand there in shock.

I'm...g-going to sleep next to Kiyoka? R-really?

Miyo and Kiyoka were very much living together, but they were still only betrothed, not actually husband and wife.

Wasn't it far too early for them to share the same bed? No, it was *definitely* too early. The whole thing was absurd.

"Miyo."

"Y-yes!" she squeaked in a weird voice that showed her unease.

"We don't have a choice. Time to sleep," Kiyoka said, taking off the jacket of the military uniform he was still wearing and picking up the nightwear that had been left for him in the corner of the room.

He smoothly undid the purple hair tie that held his hair in place, letting his gorgeous light brown locks flow down his back.

"...Miyo, it's a little difficult to change with you watching me,"

Kiyoka tentatively said to her as she stood in blank amazement. That brought her back to her senses.

Change—right, Kiyoka was going to change his clothes right now. In other words, if she stood there any longer, she would lay eyes on his bare skin.

“I-I’m sorry!” she apologized with a shout, hastily exiting into the hallway and slamming the sliding door behind her.

Miyo was so embarrassed that it felt like her face was catching fire. The wintertime hallway should have been freezing, yet her whole body was hot enough to make her want to take off her *haori* coat. It seemed like she would break out in a sweat any minute.

“I don’t really mind you watching me, though.”

“I—I certainly do!”

What did he mean by that in the first place? Did Kiyoka want Miyo to watch him undress? There was no way he was a pervert with an exhibitionist fetish, so that clearly shouldn’t be the case.

She was so beside herself that her thoughts went in a bizarre direction.

The slight rustling of clothes seemed to ring extra loud in her ears, and she no longer knew where to focus her hearing.

“I’m finished.”

The instantaneous yet unending moment passed, and Kiyoka opened the sliding door.

“Get in before you freeze. I didn’t mean to chase you out like that.”

“I understand...”

The inside of the room was bright. Crimson all the way to her ears with embarrassment, and wishing to hide her tearful eyes, Miyo kept her face down as she returned to the room.

Miyo was so worried that steam would rise up in the chilled air from her flushed body that she started wishing she could run away entirely.

Then she timidly raised her eyes, only to instantly regret it.

Miyo saw Kiyoka in his nightwear on an almost daily basis; it was neither a particularly rare sight, nor something that should unsettle her so much.

And yet, when her mind went to the fact they were about to share a bed together, the image of him wrapped up in his all-too-thin nightwear became alluring and seductive.

“Miyo, you should use the bedding.”

“What?”

Her head was so completely on fire that she couldn’t understand what her fiancé was getting at.

The way he put it, why, it was as if Kiyoka was saying he *wasn’t* going to use the bedding.

“There’s no way you’ll be able to relax if we’re lying together under the same blanket, right?”

“B-but...what about you?”

“I’m fine. I’ll figure something out, even if I can’t sleep. If push comes to shove, I can try to get some rest standing up. Rest assured, I’ll be right by your side.”

It seemed Kiyoka was intent on letting Miyo sleep by herself while he did an all-night vigil.

But she couldn’t possibly allow him to do that.

“Th-that won’t do. You should use the bedding, Kiyoka. You’ve been given a chance to get some good rest.”

“I can’t let you do that. I’d be kicking you out just so I can enjoy a leisurely night’s sleep all on my own.”

“I think it’s better that way.”

Miyo was bound to spend the following day cooped up inside this room anyway.

But things were different for Kiyoka. He was always on guard, prepared for Usui and the Gifted Communion’s attack, and had been living in an outdoor camp tent. She knew he wasn’t getting enough rest.

The other unit members, even Godou, were taking one to two days off in shifts, but Kiyoka didn’t get that, either.

She at least wanted him to be able to get a good night’s sleep in this stressful time.

“Enough joking.”

Kiyoka gave a big sigh and gently rapped Miyo’s head.

It didn’t hurt of course, but the surprise made her forget her embarrassment, so she looked Kiyoka in the face.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to get comfortable in that big blanket and doze off all by myself. Just do as I say.”

“...I don’t want to.”

Though she understood that the situation would remain unresolved, she couldn’t help standing up to him.

Of course, she just as readily understood that Kiyoka was gradually growing annoyed. Nevertheless, this was one point where she couldn’t back down.

“I don’t want you to sleep outside of the bedding.”

Hearing Miyo’s definitive declaration, Kiyoka finally appeared to relent.

“Fine then. I’ll sleep on the floor. You sleep in the bedding. That’s the only concession I’ll make.”

Kiyoka didn’t wait to hear Miyo’s reply, immediately turning his back to her, and taking one of the two pillows. Watching him as he went to lie down on the tatami floor, Miyo moved almost completely

without thinking.

“What are you doing?”

As if chasing right after him, she grabbed him by the sleeve.

It felt almost like the nerves in her fingers had been peeled open and laid bare as her whole consciousness focused on her hand.

Her briefly cooled cheeks once again grew hot.

“Um, m-maybe...w-we could both...”

She had reached her limit. It was all but impossible to put what came next into words. It was mortifying. Unladylike. Her hands were trembling. Had the courage she’d mustered gotten across to him?

Kiyoka gently removed her fingers, which had gone white from gripping his sleeve.

“I get it. As annoyed as I am to go along with Takaihito’s dirty trick here, why don’t we sleep next to each other?”

All they were doing was getting underneath the covers, and yet they both moved awkwardly as they laid down, side by side.

I can’t believe what I’ve done...

Her heart pounded like a drum in her ears. It throbbed almost painfully in her chest.

Even she couldn’t believe that she had managed to behave so audaciously.

Miyo and Kiyoka both lay down while facing away from each other, toward the outside of the blanket.

She couldn’t stop her mind from focusing on him behind her.

When she did, she worried her intensely throbbing heartbeats would travel to Kiyoka’s side of the blanket, or that he would hear her almost agonizingly rough breathing.

Miyo tried to scoot to the edge of the blanket as much as possible and huddled into a ball.

Would she be able to hold her breath in this position and wait it out until morning?

As that thought ran through Miyo’s mind, Kiyoka abruptly spoke up.

“Can’t sleep?”

Her attempt to feign slumber was quickly found out.

“N-no,” Miyo quietly replied, making sure to stop her voice from quivering as much as possible. “I can. I’ll do my best to try to sleep.”

If she didn’t, Miyo was sure that Kiyoka would be too concerned about whether she was actually slumbering or not to sleep himself.

She closed her eyes.

Miyo desperately tried to make her consciousness sink into torpor, but the sound of her heart continued to thunder, and the presence she felt behind her loomed so large in her mind that she didn’t feel the slightest bit drowsy.

All she was doing was closing her eyes.

As she struggled, she again heard Kiyoka's subdued voice.

"You can't fall asleep, can you?"

"...I can't," she answered honestly in resignation.

After being the one to invite him to share the bed, she felt absolutely pathetic.

She wanted to scold herself for optimistically assuming that as long as she was underneath the blanket, she would naturally grow drowsy and be able to fall asleep without worrying about Kiyoka beside her.

"Miyo."

"Y-yes...?"

"Why don't we chat a little until you're able to sleep?"

Was he being considerate to her? When she thought about the fact that she had held out so strongly to ensure he could rest properly only to end up in this mess, her spinelessness made her feel all the more excruciated.

But on the other hand, she was happy to have the chance to talk together, just the two of them, in a place without any extraneous noise to bother them.

"What sort of a chat?"

"...What do you *want* to talk about?"

They hadn't had any time to have a relaxed conversation these past few days.

Kiyoka was busy, and though he came to see her every day, they would only be together long enough to share a meal.

This was why Miyo thought she would have had so many different things she wanted to talk about.

But now that she was on the spot, nothing was coming to mind.

"How about we take turns asking and answering each other's questions until we start feeling sleepy?" Kiyoka asked.

"O-okay."

Questions Kiyoka wanted to ask her— Miyo stared straight at the wall through the dark and thought to herself.

However, it was his abrupt proposal, not the questioning itself, that Miyo found curious.

Asking each other questions, of all things. She couldn't help feeling that it was a very uncharacteristic suggestion. After all, it made it sound as if he wished to learn more about her.

As Miyo stewed in distress, Kiyoka went ahead and asked his question.

"I'll go first. Have you experienced anything troubling or scary since coming here?"

"No."

Miyo knew that Kiyoka couldn't see her in the darkness, but she shook her head slightly anyway.

“Everyone here has gone out of their way to be kind, and I’m constantly being protected with great care... There have been plenty of moments where I’ve considered myself truly blessed, though.”

“Is that so?”

Every last person in her life was protecting Miyo with the utmost care, on top of taking the trouble to not upend her daily routine.

That was why she hadn’t faced any problems or felt scared at all.

If anything satisfied that criteria, it was the incident that evening, which had made her blood run cold. When she considered what would’ve happened with that minister and his secretary if they had been Usui’s men, she felt petrified and trembled uncontrollably.

But even then, she hadn’t felt the same sort of loneliness she had experienced at her old home, and she had allowed herself to be at peace knowing Arata was at her side and that Takakura and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members would come rushing to aid her.

She truly didn’t feel like she was in danger, or that there was an impending crisis.

When she recalled the events of that evening, she was ashamed of her own helplessness, which was like that of a weak and feeble child.

“That’s right. Um, then I’ll ask you that, too... Have you ever felt your work was grueling and hard before?” she inquired, trying to stifle her discomfort.

Unable to immediately come up with a good question herself, she’d ended up asking the same thing Kiyoka had.

B-but I do want to know everything I can about him...

As she internally justified the question to herself, Kiyoka answered without any hesitation.

“I’ve never felt the duty itself was hard before, no.”

“Not once?”

After asking him again, Miyo remembered they had decided on taking turns, and covered her mouth with both hands.

“Oh, sorry. I accidently asked two questions.”

“It’s fine,” Kiyoka responded with a chuckle, seeming to pick up on Miyo’s dejection from the tone in her voice. “That’s right, not once. Now, I’ve had a few hard times over the course of my military career. I’ve also felt the sting of regret when my colleagues and subordinates were injured or taken out. But even then, I’ve never thought that my duty was grueling.”

“I see...”

Kiyoka spoke without hesitation, but there was no doubt he’d experienced a considerable amount of both mental and physical anguish in his work.

From what she’d heard, the same had been true of Godou’s father.

Seeing close acquaintances collapse one after another, seeing them slowly die, and the deep remorse he must've felt when he had been unable to save them—

Miyo couldn't even imagine just how much pain he had gone through.

"What about you? Do you have any regrets about becoming my fiancée?"

Kiyoka threw another question at her.

But this one was extremely easy to answer.

"Absolutely none at all. In the beginning, I was nervous about being a substitute for my little sister. But at some point, that disappeared, too."

"I'm glad."

Their voices were absorbed into the still of the night and vanished.

For a moment, only the sounds of their faint breathing hung in the air.

"....."

"....."

Her eyelids felt ever so slightly like they would fall.

Perhaps that was why.

In her half-asleep state, a desire to ask more penetrating questions bloomed.

"Kiyoka, um, so."

With her drowsiness lightly enveloping her consciousness, the final remnants of her reason and gentlewoman's modesty made the movement of her lips waver.

"What?"

The response sounded curt, but she could feel the gentleness deeper within.

"Have you ever felt...romantic love before?"

Before she knew it, the question had left her lips.

Strangely, once she had put it out into the air, her attitude became almost defiant. There was no turning back now.

"...Love, huh."

Kiyoka's tiny murmur fell into the blackness and dissolved.

After she sensed him spend a moment to gather his thoughts, Kiyoka replied in a faltering tone of voice, as if he was carefully thinking through each word he spoke.

"Honestly, I don't have any particular memories of being certain about feeling love. Now I can understand that I was being willingly unresponsive to both the feelings others showed for me, and my own feelings as well. That I had been running away from earnestly confronting them. That's why I've never felt like that before."

The way he spoke with such regret was surprising, and Miyo gasped

with her back still facing Kiyoka.

Nevertheless, it might have been only natural.

While he was a kind and thoughtful man with a gentle side, he also had a clumsiness to him.

His behavior...

"You acted that way to protect yourself, didn't you?"

...was exactly how Miyo had acted in her old home, striving to stop any emotions from appearing on her face.

"Is that how it sounds? I just thought I was being irresponsible. But in any case, what about you?"

"Huh?"

Miyo's consciousness, which had been sinking into sleep, roused slightly.

"You're afraid of something yourself, aren't you? If I've got the wrong idea, then forget it. But there's something worrying you, something that's stopping you from moving forward, right?"

"Well..."

She had an inkling that he had picked up on this.

Kiyoka had sensed the feelings that Miyo wouldn't speak of or let show on her face. On top of it, he was asking her why she was hiding them.

Miyo didn't know how to answer.

She had been the one to tread this ground first. He had also given her his serious answer himself.

Miyo had been very afraid about avoiding things and keeping them under wraps, but her heart was too seized with fear, so she found herself unable to take the first step.

"Am I unreliable?"

A nebulous coldness and fragility shown through his words.

After a brief moment of confusion, Miyo hastily denied his statement.

"Th-that's not it."

She tightly gripped the edge of the blanket.

Was he anxious? Had she made Kiyoka feel uneasy?

"Wouldn't your fiancé who loves you be hurt by that?"

Suddenly, Hazuki's words came to mind.

"No... The idea that you're unreliable has never once crossed my mind."

It was impossible to think of him that way. If anything, she was the unreliable one.

Miyo knew just how incompetent a person she was, so she couldn't believe his question.

It dawned on her that she was being selfish. That it was contradictory. After all, she had already given into these undeniable

feelings of hers, grabbing onto her position as Kiyoka's fiancée and holding on tight. That was how she'd gotten here.

She couldn't bear to bring misfortune to someone else.

That was why if these warm days they shared continued into eternity, that alone was enough, and she didn't need any burning feelings welling up inside her.

"Miyo."

"Yes?"

Behind her, she could sense that Kiyoka had rolled over to face her.

Drawn in, Miyo turned around as well.

The two were so close to each other, that even in the darkness, she could clearly make out the serious look in his eyes.

"Right now, I'm not satisfied with the current situation. I want to have even more. If possible, I'd wish I could become even more engrossed. Engrossed in you, no one else."

In other words, Kiyoka was saying that he wanted Miyo's heart, didn't he?

The tremendous shock made Miyo's breath catch in her throat, and she was rendered speechless.

"I—I—"

"Do you think that I'm shameful for having that sentiment? Does that make you feel like I'm going astray?"

The questions he threw out seemed to pierce right through the conflict in her chest.

Nevertheless, Miyo's heart was shaken, like rippling water, and it wouldn't settle down at all.

"...It doesn't."

She averted eyes and somehow managed to give a simple answer.

Suddenly, Kiyoka caressed Miyo's cheek with his slender fingers. His fingertips gradually brought warmth to her cold cheeks.

"Sorry. I asked too many questions, didn't I?"

His apology had a troubled, frail tone to it. When she considered she was the one causing him to feel this way, she couldn't get her words to come out properly.

Miyo simply shut her eyes and silently shook her head.

As she did, she was pulled slowly into sleep.

 CHAPTER 4
The Past Within Dreams

Gray clouds hung low in the skies, and the air had grown even colder, a biting wind picking up.

White snowflakes had still yet to start falling, but the weather was foreboding. Anyone could tell that the skies would open up before long.

Within the grounds of the Imperial Palace, the residence of the most august family in the capital, in an open area near the section housing the buildings of the Ministry of the Imperial Household and the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, there was a temporary base of operations for the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, referred to as the advanced guard.

Ten days had already come and gone since it had been set up.

Beneath the tent erected over the camp were many simple chairs and long desks, occupied by unit members at all hours of the day.

At the moment, several of the soldiers, Kiyoka included, were paying attention to an additional person.

“Oh, I see you’ve already gotten started. Quite early, isn’t it?”

A carefree voice, without the slightest hint of urgency, rang out over them.

A young man wearing a casual kimono with a gaudy and vivid base color appeared before them as he fiddled with a garish folding fan.

The head of the Tatsuishi family, Kazushi Tatsuishi, was in his typically extravagant getup.

“You should have gotten here sooner.”

“I’m perfectly on time. Isn’t that enough?”

Despite Godou presenting his harsh criticism with a scowl, Kazushi simply replied with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders.

Their back-and-forth was old news at this point, and Kiyoka simply

let out a small sigh since he had long given up on reprimanding them.

"I'm thinking here I'll have to explain everything from the beginning. *Hee-hee.*"

A doctor by the name of Jakuji Unan, who had previously treated Godou's wounds, spoke up in a nagging tone of voice.

Both a medical professional and one of the few people conducting research on Gift-users, the man was a relative of Kiyoka's on his mother's side.

"Just give us your findings," the commander brusquely replied.

Kiyoka had known Unan for a long time, but he didn't want anything to do with him. As a result, he always ended up being slightly harsh when interacting with him.

But this didn't seem to bother Unan in the slightest, and he continued speaking as though nothing had happened.

"Fine. I'll stick to my findings, then. Those visible Grotesqueries? It seems that many of them were forced into corporeal bodies."

Corporeal and spiritual forms—in other words, the body and soul.

Humans and other living organisms had souls, which resided in physical bodies.

Conversely, Grotesqueries could exist in their spiritual forms alone, as essentially just a soul. Because they lacked physical bodies, only Gift-users or those possessing Spirit-Sight could see them.

However, the Gifted Communion has found a way to turn invisible Grotesqueries into visible creatures.

The most potent method of making Grotesqueries, nothing more than souls, visible to the average person, was to force them to take physical form. To put it in Western terms, they were essentially "incarnating."

Some high-level Grotesqueries were very powerful and possessed a human-like ego. These beings could freely manifest and dispel a corporeal form to slip into human society and live out their lives.

But the Grotesqueries of the Gifted Communion were different.

Somehow or another, they had found a way to give weak supernatural creatures physical forms, which normal people could see.

The workings of this process seemed to resemble what had happened with the fiend-possessed man Kiyoka had encountered near the Kudou villa.

Back then, the Gifted Communion had forced a fiend to inhabit the body of a man, giving the Grotesquerie corporeal form. Then they extracted the creature's blood and injected it into some of their followers to transform them into artificial Gift-users.

In all likelihood, the latest Grotesqueries had been developed through a refined version of that same process.

"And as for what came out of them, well. Take a look."

Unan placed an unassuming small white dish on the long table. As he did, he took out what appeared to be a foreign-made loupe from his pocket and placed them down together.

“Go ahead and take a gander at the middle of this plate.”

The loupe wasn’t necessary. They looked at where Unan was pointing and saw a tiny translucent sphere, about the size of the tip of an infant’s little finger.

“I tell you, it was so small, I had a devil of a time finding the thing. It’s a barrier.”

“This little thing?!”

Godou let out a surprised shout.

For some reason, Unan responded to his reaction with a creepy, satisfied smile.

“Quite incredible, isn’t it? I’d never seen such a tiny barrier before, but it’s still quite sturdy. It’s perverse, really. There must be someone who’s quite well-versed in the barrier arts in the Gifted Communion’s ranks.”

Kiyoka scowled at Unan’s almost enraptured tone of voice.

He didn’t know who this arts user was, but whoever they were, they probably wouldn’t have appreciated being called perverse.

One thing was clear, however—the person who’d made this barrier had great skill.

Kiyoka took pride in the strength of his barrier arts, but he wasn’t very confident he could make a shield as minute as this himself.

“I get it, incredible stuff. But how exactly does this give Grotesqueries corporeal bodies, then?”

At Kazushi’s question, Unan launched into a lengthy explanation, as if he had been waiting for the opportunity.

“Gifts and arts of any kind, not just barriers, have an effect on both corporeal and spiritual bodies. Because they can affect both types of forms, that means they can be used to bind the spiritual to the corporeal. Inside this spherical barrier, there’s a tiiny fragment of a human nail. No clue who it belongs to, mind you.”

“A nail...”

Now that Unan had pointed it out, they noticed that there was indeed some foreign object fading in and out of view inside the translucent sphere.

“The Gifted Communion embeds a barrier containing a human nail inside the Grotesqueries. That means the inside of the barrier is acting upon the corporeal form, while the exterior is acting upon the spiritual form. When they do this, the Grotesqueries are coaxed by the organic physical form—the human nail buried together with the barrier inside them—into becoming a living creature with a physical body, albeit an imperfect one. That’s the gist of it.”

If even just a small portion of Grotesqueries were given corporeal bodies, then many people would be able to see and touch them, even if it didn't work for necessarily everyone.

It was all slightly complicated, but Kiyoka understood the logic.

This will be trouble.

The Gifts and arts that Gift-users wielded against Grotesqueries with spiritual bodies were naturally less effective on those with physical forms.

To eradicate these corporeal Grotesqueries, they would need to attack them as if they were a physical opponent, not a spiritual one.

But that was easier said than done.

Past experience had subconsciously instilled Gift-users and arts-users with the notion that Grotesqueries were spiritual beings. It would be difficult for them to immediately shift how they thought of these new Grotesqueries the moment they encountered one, and that resistance would create an opening.

That being said, once they understood the trick behind the visible Grotesqueries, there was another angle they could take to address them.

"Does this mean...that dispelling the barrier inside the Grotesqueries would also undo their corporeal forms?"

Unan nodded at Godou's confused question.

"Correct. That would be why I've had him join us today."

Everyone turned their eyes to Kazushi.

"I get it. Barriers are arts, and I specialize in dispelling them, so this falls into my wheelhouse."

While Kazushi possessed Spirit-Sight, his Gift was largely unusable. To compensate, he had studied the dispelling arts so that he could support Gift-users.

"Once the barrier inside a visible Grotesquerie is dispelled, it will be unable to maintain its corporeal form and go back to being invisible like normal. Powerful Gift-users like you, Kiyoka, could also try destroying the barriers inside the Grotesqueries with brute strength. They're pretty sturdy, but that doesn't mean they're indestructible."

It was difficult to destroy a strong barrier with sheer force, and the structure of the arts that went into constructing a barrier this elaborate would require an ample amount of skill to dispel.

Even then, it would be easier to get Gift-users and arts-users to internalize the fact that their opponents' true form was a barrier rather than Grotesqueries that had taken corporeal form.

Regardless, they were still in for quite the headache, despite their better grasp of the situation.

Kiyoka quickly recalled the individual skills of his troops and thought about how to reorganize them into a group that could likely

handle these Grotesqueries well.

During the lull in the conversation, Kazushi quietly stretched his hand out to the small plate.

“Oh, it really can be dispelled.”

Just then, the sphere faded away without a sound, leaving the minute particles of white nail fragments behind on the plate.

“Hey! What the hell did you do that for?!”

“Hold on, no need to get angry. Now we know that these barriers can be dispelled, right? Just do this from here on out and voilà, problem solved.”

Despite Godou scolding his unruly behavior, Kazushi deflected the comment effortlessly and remained composed.

Although Kazushi was under his command, Kiyoka gave up on cautioning him and turned to Godou.

“I need you to update everyone in the unit on this without delay, Godou. From now on, if anyone encounters a Grotesquerie that’s visible to the common people and resistant to Gifts, they should get someone capable of using dispelling arts to dispose of it. If that isn’t an option, they’re either to break the barrier inside the Grotesquerie with brute force or capture the creature with a barrier of their own.”

“Understood!”

Godou straightened to attention in agreement. Then Kiyoka gave a reminder to Kazushi.

“Don’t forget you’ll be working hard for us, too, Kazushi.”

“I know, I know. What else am I here for?”

Kazushi assented despite the flippant smile that came to his face, but that didn’t stop Godou from glaring at him.

“Tatsuishi! You better not give the commander any trouble. Absolutely none, you hear me?!”

It appeared that Godou’s usual casualness went out the window when Kazaushi was around.

Fiery hostility aside, Kiyoka thought Godou was the more capable of the two men, but perhaps that wasn’t really the issue.

“Okay, okay. Honestly, Godou, you sure do love the commander. Maybe that’s why you haven’t had a single lover to your name.”

“What?! Knock it off with that nonsense!”

“Stop bickering and get to it. You’re giving me a headache.”

Kiyoka dispelled the tension and glared at his two subordinates.

“...Sure, sure.”

They left the tent, Godou looking reluctant while Kazushi grinned. Outside, a damp wind had already begun to blow.

Miyo lazily lifted her eyelids.

The light breeze, bringing a verdant scent that grazed the skin, faintly rocked Miyo's long black hair as it blew by.

She was greeted by the now familiar sight of a traditional wooden house, whose garden lay beneath the shade of a tree. She already knew where she was.

The Usuba house of the past...

Truths of the past shown to her through the power of Dream Sight. The place where her mother Sumi, before Miyo's birth, and Usui, had met and their memories together.

To when in the past had she come this time?

She felt like time was gradually progressing forward with each of her visits, though she couldn't say this for sure.

Miyo's eyes fell on Sumi in her youth, sitting in the shade beneath the eaves of the house.

Her mother wore a *tsumugi* silk kimono with a vibrant morning glories pattern, and her lustrous black hair was tied up with a charming flower-decorated hairpin, except for a few strands left loose hanging behind her.

She looked the picture of a young maiden as she stood on the porch of the house, staring far off into the distance.

Usui, who would usually be close at Sumi's side in these visions, was nowhere to be found. And yet...

She couldn't ignore the feeling in her gut.

Right—this was the same uncanny sensation she'd experienced the last time she went into this dream.

This isn't good. I need to wake up fast.

When she put her hand on the trunk of a tree, its firmness and roughness were vivid beneath her fingers.

She couldn't stay here like this. Deep in her consciousness, her instincts were telling her to be on guard.

"I've been waiting for you, Miyo."

She gasped in shock, as though she had been doused with icy water.

The voice calling to her from the side was dispassionate enough to send a shiver down her spine, yet she could also hear what sounded like unrivaled delight in its tone.

"You're..."

His pupils gleamed with terrifying insanity from behind his round lenses. Though he was dressed as a student and his features were quite a bit more youthful than they were now, the impression he left on her was the same.

Naoshi Usui had clearly recognized Miyo and called out to her.

The blood instantly drained from her face.

"There's no need to be so guarded. I'm not going to do anything.

Besides, no one can hope to best you in the world of dreams, so I'd be unable to anyway."

True as that may have been, it didn't put her at ease.

The man who had hurt her and the people in her life was right in front of her—it would be outright lunacy to let her guard down.

However, there was a fundamental problem that made the present situation strange.

"Why?"

Why was she able to hold a conversation with this version of Usui, who should have been a resident of the dream world?

The most striking characteristic of Dream Sight was that it allowed one to enter dreams. This attribute was wholly unique, even among the other Gift-users in the Usuba family, and only Miyo could wield it. So why was Usui able to use it, too?

Usui curled his lips at Miyo's dumbfounded murmur.

"You thought you were seeing the actual past in your dreams up until now, didn't you? It is true that you can read into the past, the present, and the future with the power of Dream Sight. But the truth is that these glimpses of bygone days are all playing out in *my* dreams."

"What...?"

Miyo widened her eyes at the unexpected revelation.

Up until now, she had thought she was experiencing actual events from the past in these dreams, as though she were simply viewing memories.

That was how it had been when she had looked into the Saimoris' past in her sleep before. Those dreams hadn't belonged to anyone else. She'd simply been viewing the past in a dream of her own.

That was why she had assumed her visions of the Usuba house were the same.

Usui, the spitting image of his younger self, gazed with affection at his old home.

"Ever since being separated from Sumi, I haven't gone a single day without dreaming of these peaceful times. These are my memories, reminiscences of a time that genuinely existed, playing out in my dreams."

"So all of it..."

"You were using the power of Dream Sight to enter into my dreams."

That was the truth behind the uncanny sensation she'd felt last time.

I thought I had been looking at pictures or illustrations of the past, but I was mistaken.

Miyo had considered this glimpse of the past as nothing more than superficial puppet theater, when in fact, it was actually the product of Usui's consciousness. It was the vision of the man who had lost Sumi

and was leading the Gifted Communion to plunge the Empire into chaos.

Miyo had been wrong to assume that it was impossible for a character in dream to notice the presence of an onlooker.

These glimpses of the Usuba family's past, which she had started to see following her encounter with Usui, were in fact the man's memories become dream.

"I kept getting this strange feeling, like someone was watching me. I'd thought it might be you, and it seems I was right."

Miyo took one, then two steps back, putting distance between herself and Usui.

If this really was a dream, he couldn't have harmed her if he tried. Nevertheless, her aversion had won out; she didn't want to be anywhere near him.

I want to wake up as fast as possible, so why can't I?

Time continued to elapse, yet the feeling of her rising up from the dream world back to reality wasn't coming to her. Miyo grew frustrated, annoyed at her own immature skills as a Gift-user.

If running away was off the table, there was only one thing she could do.

Miyo steeled herself and fixed her eyes on Usui.

She was going to pull as much information out of him as she could. At the very least, she ought to use this golden opportunity to help assist Kiyoka and the others in their work.

Especially since she could talk to Usui here without any fear of his Gift.

"...Why do you things that hurt people?"

"What do you mean by that?"

It seemed that Usui also intended on entertaining Miyo's questions.

Before she knew it, the younger version of Sumi had vanished, and she and Usui were the only ones in the dream world.

Usui stepped into the shade of the eaves where Sumi had been moments prior and took a seat.

"Turning people into Gift-users; deceiving them like you did with Kaoruko. There are many people who've been hurt by what you've done."

"They brought all that upon themselves. It was their choice to make. If they were ultimately harmed, I'm not responsible for it. Would you denounce a rock on the side of the road for making people trip?"

"...I wouldn't."

Hard pressed for an answer, Miyo lowered her eyes. She had no hopes of winning a battle of the tongue.

After all, Usui was as eloquent as he was competent. He was adept at deceiving people and was ultimately trying to get his claws into the

hearts of the Empire's citizenry, too.

She needed to get her mind in order before it shattered.

"Making more Gift-users and abducting the emperor in order to take over the country... That's wrong. If you want to change something, then there must be some other wa—"

"Ah, I get it now. This is a perfect opportunity. Let's talk a bit."

Usui interrupted Miyo's impassioned argument.

The wind blew, causing trees to sway and leaves to rustle. The Usuba house was beautiful in early summertime.

Too beautiful for Miyo and Usui alone.

"I wish to create a new world, you see. Make a country ruled by remarkable people, by Gift-users, and eventually spread that idea across the globe."

Miyo repeated the words *a new world* inwardly.

Destroy everything he didn't agree with and build it all back anew—it was the same thing Usui himself had said in her previous visit to his dreams.

Did that mean he took issue with the parts of the current Empire, and the world as a whole, that weren't exactly as he wanted?

"Is it power you're after?"

He wanted to replace the emperor and shape the country to his whims.

Usui's assertions sounded like unrealistic boasting, like a young boy's view of the future.

A country wasn't a single man's plaything.

"That's not quite it. Power should be held by those suited to wield it. And we possess the appropriate strength to do so."

Usui shook his head, clawing at the gravel on the ground with his nails.

"The status quo is wrong. There's absolutely no reason at all why the Usubas—why remarkable Gift-users in general—should be disregarded by society. Yet, look at the reality we live in. Everyone lives in ignorance of who wields true strength, and the common folk mistake themselves for exceptional, taking power for themselves as though it's their right."

"....."

"The structure of the country, where the reigning emperor sits on top, is also wrong. The Gift of Divine Revelation barely holds a candle to your Dream Sight or the Usubas' Gifts, and all of them slight any other Gift-users outside of their family. Yet the government chases them away to the shadows.

"This should be a nation where Gift-users are at the helm, and the members of the Usuba stand above them all."

Usui's ideals were nothing more than a world that suited his own

desires.

He was blaming his own powerlessness on the world and the country, while trying to overthrow the rule of law. Miyo could only feel like he was erring in where he focused all his efforts.

“...It seems like you’re venting your anger about being unable to save my mother.”

Usui blinked, his expression suggesting he was surprised at what Miyo had pointed out in her pained and desperate murmur.

He then gave a throaty chortle.

“You’re quite sharp. Truly Sumi’s daughter. The way you don’t mince words, despite your mild-mannered nature, is just like her.”

Then, sitting cross-legged flat on the ground and resting his cheek on his hand, Usui continued, his smile growing wider and wider.

“When you show me that side of you, it makes me want to offer the new world I’ve created to you in Sumi’s stead.”

Miyo shivered at Usui, who’d “offered her the world” as if it was a totally natural sentiment, and instinctively rubbed her upper arms.

“You have that right. It should be the Usubas, not the emperor, who oversees the Gift-users. And Dream Sight is the most powerful of the Usuba gifts. It’s only logical to make you queen of the new world.”

The young version of Usui spoke with what almost felt like pride.

As delayed though this realization was, Miyo now felt like she could finally understand why the Usuba family had avoided the limelight and continued to regulate themselves up until now.

It was to contain people gripped by ambition, like the man before her, from within.

“You should be able to understand what I’m saying, Miyo. Don’t tell me that you never felt it was unfair, being unjustly oppressed and abused all those years.”

Suddenly, she came to her senses.

Back when she was living in her old home, she had wondered why things were so unfair more times than she could count.

Miyo had also felt angry when she learned that she had the power of Dream Sight; she lamented that she hadn’t awakened to her powers sooner and questioned why she had lived that torturous existence all those years.

But Usui’s still wrong.

The Saimoris may have been foolish, but she didn’t think that meant she should have control over them or want anything of the sort. Not once had she wished for that.

Could Miyo really say that she was that much better than the Saimoris?

How could Usui be so confident that he wouldn’t end up doing just the same and not harm anyone, while not creating the slightest bit of

unfairness himself?

Convincing himself that he was superior and capable of leading the country, and forcing this down the throats of the citizenry—impudent didn't even begin to describe it.

"I don't understand. I don't need that sort of power at all."

"Really?"

"Huh?"

Usui's tone suddenly grew sharp. He sounded almost like a savage predator zeroing in on its prey.

"Do you really think that will be enough to protect what you hold dear?"

"....."

"You still think that you'll be fine as long as you're the only one getting hurt because your world is so small. But you'll learn eventually. The people you hold dear will get hurt and suffer, and you won't be able to stop yourself from looking back, thinking all the while that things could have been different if you were stronger."

If someone Miyo loved got hurt, would she still be able to say that power was unappealing to her?

Usui's eyes, which trembled with the pain of losing the woman he'd loved most, spoke volumes.

A single dark blotch spread in her heart. She felt like there was another version of her, whispering in her ear—*"Really?"*

But she couldn't waver. There was no way Usui's path was the correct one.

"...I don't need a world where everything is exactly the way I want it to be."

She managed to respond in a pathetically quivering voice.

From this, it was all too clear that she would be unable to deny what Usui was saying.

"I'm going to attain what I'm after. I'm sure I'll be able to make you the queen of the world, but I assume you'll deny the honor yet again."

Yet surprisingly, Usui quieted his hawkish tone, conceding the point with shocking ease.

Naturally, Miyo couldn't feel any peace of mind, but she still gave a sigh of relief and replied with a firm nod.

"That's right. I refuse."

"Fine. But that's still not enough to make me give up."

When Usui rose to his feet, the beautiful scenery of vivid greenery surrounding them seemed to blur ever so slightly.

"I've continued down this path since before you were born, for over twenty years, and no one can get in my way. Not you, or anyone else."

His expression was a mix of delight and terrible conviction.

Miyo's heart beat even faster, neither her unease nor terror

dissipating.

“I will not help you.”

Each word putting her nerves on edge, she once again made her stance clear to both Usui and herself.

If she showed him any opening, he would immediately take advantage of it.

...*Calm down, Miyo. It's okay.*

Unable to blink for even a moment, she persuaded herself.

She just needed to continue rejecting him and hold out until she woke up from the dream.

But for some reason, she couldn't shake the ominous feeling she had. Like dirt caked on top of a window, there was something that hadn't been cleanly cleared away.

“No. You will come to my side, no matter what. There's a number of ways to go about it, you see. Especially now that power and authority are in my grasp.”

Usui's voice was mocking as Miyo tried to withstand the cold shiver that ran down her back.

“What are you planning?”

The pounding in her heart was quickly getting louder and faster. She felt as though she was staring down a wild beast that threatened to pounce the moment she turned her back on it.

A cold sweat beaded on her forehead, and she took another step back.

“Come now. There's much better ways I can get my hands on you than going after you while you're so heavily protected.”

Usui stepped out from the shade into the sunlight, his expression ecstatic, as though he was savoring his joy and others' sorrow. He made no effort to hide his abnormal demeanor as he addressed her calmly.

“Like taking care of Kiyoka Kudou myself.”

Despair and understanding rose in her chest all at once.

Kiyoka is my everything...

She felt the strength drain from her whole body and was on the verge of collapsing to the ground.

Miyo was able to be confident because Kiyoka was there. His presence enabled her to hope for a life of warmth and tranquility.

Without Kiyoka, there was no happiness for Miyo. If he disappeared, then...at that point, it was all too difficult to even imagine what laid beyond for her.

“B-but Kiyoka...”

Usui sneered at Miyo, who could just barely choke out a reply between labored breaths.

“You think he'll be fine because he's strong? *Hah-hah-hah.* Oh, it

won't be fine for him at all."

At some point, Usui had closed in on Miyo as she stood paralyzed.

"He's a soldier and a public servant. There are things that he can't fight against. Even in order to protect you or others, mind you."

"What are you going to do?"

She wanted to believe there was no way Kiyoka could lose.

Yet, despite it all, she felt a hopeless uneasiness inside her. Usui's brash confidence and lack of agitation heightened her anxiety.

"...What would be the fun in telling you that? It's about time to wake up from this dream."

Usui turned around. Forgetting her fear entirely, Miyo reached out a hand to stop him.

"Wait! What are you going to do to Kiyoka?!"

She pleaded in her chest to the dream—*please, don't let him wake.*

If she could keep him locked up in this vision forever, he wouldn't be able to harm anyone.

This one moment was enough. If Gifts did become stronger, like Arata had said, with the strength of one's thoughts, then now was the time.

Miyo didn't care what happened to her, she just wanted to trap Usui in this dream and make absolutely sure he didn't leave.

However, she was too slow.

The scenery around them was already shimmering like a heat haze, blurring and beginning to lose color.

"Go ahead and think it over for yourself. Though you won't be able to stop me either way. Once I take down Kiyoka Kudou, you'll absolutely be coming over to our side."

The final words Usui left with Miyo were filled with foreboding.

She unconsciously pressed down on her chest and bit her lip.

Kiyoka won't lose. I won't be going with you, either.

If she knew that Kiyoka was Usui's target, then they could find a method of stopping him. There had to be at least some way to get through this all without yielding to the Gifted Communion and Usui.

"...I need to let Kiyoka know."

She encouraged herself. She couldn't let herself lose and be stricken with despair right now.

Usui disappeared completely from sight, and the once tranquil Usuba house of the past crumbled along with him, vanishing without leaving a single trace behind.

She awoke to pain in her throat.

The expensive, polished wooden writing desk in the room she had been assigned in Takaihito's imperial residence still had a number of

books spread all over its surface.

Miyo had drifted off to sleep while leafing through the textbooks she'd borrowed from Hazuki and reviewing their contents.

How long had she been out for?

Her throat, chilled by the winter air, ached with pain.

"My dream... Oh no. I have to let Kiyoka know about Usui right away."

Her sleep-addled mind awakened in an instant, and Miyo immediately rose to her feet.

Usui's target wasn't Miyo, but Kiyoka. Or rather, it was more accurate to say that he was trying to dispose of Kiyoka in order to go after her.

She opened up the sliding screen. Although it was far too early for sunset, the sky was covered in gray clouds, and everything was starting to get gloomy.

According to Takaihito's prediction, the moment of truth would happen when snow had fallen and piled up. Even if there was still spare time until the snowfall began accumulating, she needed to hurry.

Usui had told her of his intentions in his dream, and the sky was growing ominous—danger was closing in.

"Miyo?"

She turned around at hearing her name to find Hazuki and Yurie standing there, confused looks on their faces.

"Perfect timing. We were just about to come and wake you, Miss Miyo."

"...What's wrong? You seem like you're at your wit's end."

"Well, just look at the sky," Miyo replied instantly.

Hazuki nodded with understanding.

"I know. But, it's okay. Prince Takaihito's already begun working on it."

She wanted to explain to Hazuki that, no, that wasn't what she meant, but every second was precious right now.

On top of that, Miyo couldn't go outside without protection.

She turned her head every which way, searching for her bodyguard, but she couldn't find Arata anywhere.

"Where's Arata, Sis?"

"Huh? Oh, he said he needed to excuse himself for a moment and left... Hmm, that was probably five minutes ago? It looks like he hasn't gotten back yet. Quite careless of him during a crisis."

"So, he's gone."

Her impatience and panic only continued to worsen.

What am I supposed to do?

No matter how urgent the situation was, it would be far too

imprudent for her to go charging out of the residence on her own.

Arata should have given her another bodyguard she was familiar with when he wasn't at her side, but it seemed he hadn't done that before leaving. And because time was of the essence, she couldn't wait and see how things played out, either.

Why was this all happening when she needed to go to the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit's camp as fast as possible to see Kiyoka?

"Seriously, Miyo, what's wrong?"

"There's something I absolutely need to let Kiyoka know."

Hazuki's expression hardened at Miyo's panicked desperation.

"You want to go see Kiyoka, then. But we can't do anything about that without someone to guard you."

Was Arata still elsewhere?

He had sworn to protect Miyo. So why wasn't he here now, of all times?

"I'm sure that Kiyoka will be coming this way to shore up the defenses, but... Wait a minute, I'll send out a messenger familiar and tell him to hurry."

Hazuki continued down the corridor, entered her room, and returned with a small handbag in her hands.

From the bag, she took out a small piece of white paper, and released it into the air.

"I just hope it'll get to him fast. Yurie?"

"Yes?"

"Contact one of the couriers and have them call a guard for Miyo. Anyone will do, they don't need to be a Gift-user."

"Right away."

At Hazuki's instructions, Yurie immediately turned on her heels and left.

Then Hazuki faced Miyo again, her expression grim.

"There's not much time, is there?"

"That's right."

Just how long would it take for Hazuki's familiar to reach Kiyoka and his men, and for them to get here?

If by some chance Usui put his plan into action during that time—or worse, before they managed to reach their residences—then Miyo couldn't just simply wait and do nothing.

She nodded somewhat hesitantly at Hazuki's question.

"Got it. Even if we can't go over to where Kiyoka is on our own, why don't we grab one of the guards stationed here for now and wait in the entryway for Kiyoka's arrival?"

"Yes. Let's do that."

Miyo alone went to turn around, but Hazuki grabbed her hand.

"Wait, Miyo. I'll go, too."

“No, Sis. Please stay in your room.”

While they wouldn't be leaving the barrier, there was no way of knowing what would happen, and she couldn't get Hazuki wrapped up in everything, too.

Though she wouldn't exactly be a burden, there was a chance that Hazuki could be taken hostage, which would be no better than Miyo getting kidnapped.

But it seemed like Hazuki's mind was made up.

“It's fine. I'm sure even I'll be able to buy you some time if anything happens. More importantly, though, we don't have a moment to waste arguing here.”

“...That's true.”

Miyo nodded, managing to reign in her impatience.

She wanted to rush to Kiyoka's side, even if meant leaving the barrier. But Miyo was powerless outside a dream, and if that caused a problem, then all the hard work up until now would come to nothing.

Hazuki had sent for Kiyoka with a familiar, so waiting was the best course of action.

As the two hurried to the entrance, they called to any guard they saw. While they had also entrusted Yurie with the task, they needed as many as they could get their hands on.

However, they were met with an unexpected state of affairs.

“Huh? Why?”

“As I said, I am unable to guard you unless I receive orders from His Highness Prince Takaihito himself, or get permission from the Grand Chamberlain or the Minister of the Imperial Household.”

The guards all blankly answered them in the same way, none of them paying any mind to Hazuki's or Miyo's pleas.

“I refuse.”

“You will need to bring a summons to solicit my service.”

“First you'll need to run this by the Grand Chamberlain...”

While some of the guards gave them frowns of pity, they all refused the women's request for protection.

This isn't right.

Even Miyo couldn't help finding it suspicious.

She and the other guests were staying here on Takaihito's orders, so it naturally followed that the guards stationed here should protect them as well. While leaving their post may not have been ideal, it was strange that not a single one of them was cooperative with Miyo.

“What's the meaning of this? Does the Imperial Household Ministry make it a rule to only hire insensitive boors?”

Hazuki was furious, staring daggers at the men.

Although they didn't know the whereabouts of the Minister of the Imperial Household or the Grand Chamberlain, Takaihito was in the

main building. They could use the connecting corridor to request a direct audience with him, but he was busy himself, and it was very hard to imagine they'd be able to meet with him immediately, especially with crisis looming.

"If we're getting turned down, they're probably declining Yurie's requests, too."

Since the guards wouldn't help, they tried asking passing courtiers to call for someone able to protect Miyo, but their reaction wasn't any different.

For the past ten days since they had begun residing in the palace, the courtiers had readily responded to any of their daily needs, so Miyo hadn't noticed.

Outside of Arata and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, no one would move to protect Miyo, Hazuki, and Yurie.

"What should we do...?"

"We don't have a choice. We'll have to just head over to the entrance by ourselves. As long as we don't leave the barrier, there shouldn't be a problem, and I'm sure it won't take long until Kiyoka arrives, too."

"You're right."

In the end, Arata was nowhere to be found, and they were currently without any dedicated protection, but there was nothing they could do about it.

Putting on their sandals, they went out past the entryway while straddling the doorsill.

The effects of the barrier put to counter the Gifted Communion extended to the main building where Takaihito resided, the two separated buildings where Miyo and the others resided, and the surrounding gardens. They couldn't go out any farther than that.

"Looks like they haven't gotten here yet."

She couldn't make out Kiyoka or the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit on the small gravel road that extended out from the entryway.

Nevertheless, between her bodyguard and the looming crisis, so many things seemed to be going wrong that her fear amplified even further.

"I can't help feeling like this is all deliberate."

Miyo agreed with Hazuki's opinion.

If this was all just some form of harassment, she wouldn't have cared, but she grew scared when it occurred to her that it could be a Gifted Communion set-up.

"That stupid brother of mine. The same goes for Masashi, too. This 'protection' of theirs is full of holes. You can be sure I'll chew them out about all this later!"

Miyo glanced at Hazuki as she groused in frustration, then went

back to eagerly waiting for Kiyoka to appear.

But it was neither Kiyoka, Arata, or anyone in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit who finally showed after the excruciating wait.

“What...?”

“Who is that, I wonder?”

A single man appeared from the far side of the road and leisurely approached them.

He was dressed in a well-made suit, and his average-looking face lacked remarkable characteristics to speak of. Miyo was familiar with him.

“...I believe that’s the Minister of Education’s secretary.”

“Him? But why is the secretary coming to a place like this by himself?”

Hazuki’s question was understandable, but Miyo could only tilt her head in confusion.

Before long, the secretary reached the edge of the barrier and passed right through it.

“If he’s able to cross the barrier, then he’s not Naoshi Usui in disguise, but...what could he possibly be here for during an emergency like this?”

Hazuki furrowed her well-kept brows and glared at the secretary dubiously.

While the barrier was able to repel Usui, it didn’t have any effect on the government officials. It was unavoidable, lest it hindered governmental procedures.

To prevent this from becoming an issue, guards from the Ministry of the Imperial Household were stationed here around the clock, and Miyo’s group had Arata charged as their personal bodyguard, but now both of those mechanisms had stopped functioning.

The secretary stood right in front of the two guarded women, barring their way with a look of slight disgust on his face.

“Miyo Saimori. We meet again.”

“Q-quite.”

Miyo was perplexed to hear him greet her so casually.

She had only ever met him once, had no memories of getting along with him, and didn’t have the sort of relationship that would prompt him to speak so familiarly with her.

The man’s cordial greeting left her unsure how to respond; she didn’t know the underlying reason behind his demeanor, so it felt unnatural and creepy.

Completely unperturbed, the secretary continued speaking, as though totally unaware of Miyo and Hazuki’s suspicious looks.

“Were you perhaps about to head out somewhere?”

“No... Um, that’s not it.”

Miyo shrunk back, and Hazuki took a step in front of her, a commanding look on her face.

“Pardon me, but what exactly is your business here?”

The secretary scoffed and shrugged.

“Would saying I’m here for work be enough for you? I’m the secretary of the Minister of Education, you know. I don’t believe a common citizen like yourself has any right to stop me.”

“Yes, I suppose not. However, this area is currently on high alert, under the orders of Prince Takaihito. Work or no, we can’t have people coming and going as they please. Furthermore, this building is Prince Takaihito’s private residence. I could understand you entering if you were an official with the Ministry of the Imperial Household, or working for the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, but I find it hard to believe someone from the Ministry of Education has any business here.”

Miyo nervously flicked her eyes back and forth between the pair’s faces as she watched Hazuki assert herself without giving an inch to the man, despite his high status.

“Ugh. Enough of your yapping...”

The secretary let out a low mumble from his still smiling face.

Miyo thought she had misheard, given how vastly different his tone was from his expression. But then she remembered.

When she had first encountered this man, she thought he scowled at her, albeit for the briefest of moments.

“Sis.”

A sinister foreboding flickered in the back of her mind. Miyo called out to Hazuki and tried putting a hand on her to get her to back down, but she was too late.

“You came and caused a big fuss just the other day, didn’t you? Right now we’re even more guarded than we were then. Do you understand?”

“Oh yes, of course I understand.”

The secretary was completely unapologetic and answered as if there was no problem at all. It seemed like he couldn’t have cared less.

His answer and actions were so incongruous that Hazuki didn’t immediately grasp what was happening.

“Huh?”

“As I said, I am perfectly aware of how things are right now. I don’t need you to tell me.”

She was too late. The secretary stamped his leather shoes into the ground as if to threaten her and approached with long strides. Then he shoved Hazuki aside and closed in on Miyo.

Next, he grabbed her thin wrist and pulled her away.

“N-no...!”

Though she tried to shake free, the secretary was too strong, so she couldn't move an inch. His grip hurt her down to her bones.

"What in the world do you think you're doing?! Let go of her—*Eaugh!*"

Hazuki paled and tried to get in between the secretary and Miyo, but he shoved her away hard.

Appearing to have held nothing back, the man slammed Hazuki against the gravel.

"Sis!"

"Don't get in my way. That's enough roundabout theatrics. I'm here for Miyo Saimori."

The man dropped all pleasantries, and the air about him transformed into something much more boorish than someone purporting to be a minister's secretary.

Miyo stared at him from up close and froze.

"Y-your eyes."

Red. Pupils gleaming deep crimson, like fresh blood.

She had heard something from Kiyoka.

The eyes of the Gift-users created by the Gifted Communion turned red when they received their artificial abilities.

Some people were born with eyes that had a naturally reddish hue. But this man's had been a totally ordinary shade of dark brown until moments ago. Their color had changed abruptly.

"Well, this is certainly useful. This Gift, I mean. Though I *was* getting a bit tired of working under a minister who doesn't even believe they exist. Ah well, the Founder asked me to do it, so there was nothing I could do."

The secretary was in excessively good cheer.

Founder?

That was what the members of the Gifted Communion called Naoshi Usui. At that point, it was undeniable.

Miyo broke into goosebumps.

She lowered her eyes from his face and saw that something unbelievable was flying at them.

What in the...? Is that a Grotesquerie?

She covered her mouth with her empty hand and gasped.

The ground, which should have been covered in white gravel, was black as far as the eye could see. But it hadn't changed color—no, it was covered with enough squirming black Grotesqueries to block out the earth.

Their forms were that of bugs, rats, and birds, as well as creatures composed of several animal traits, like the one they encountered on New Year's Day, all of various shapes and sizes.

Miyo and Hazuki had been surrounded before they even knew it.

“Quite a magnificent sight, isn’t it? The impact’s much different once you have these sorts of numbers. I wonder what would happen if I had them attack the prince’s residence?”

The man spoke with an air of excitement. Even as her face was ghostly pale, Hazuki still courageously scowled at the man.

“You’re with the Gifted Communion...! Do you realize what’s going to happen now that you’ve done this? And let go of Miyo’s hand!”

Hazuki rose to her feet and tried once again to free Miyo’s hand from the man’s grasp.

However, her delicate frame was no match for him at all, and he swatted her back as though shooing away a fly.

“Shut up. I don’t care about you, okay?”

“Stop! Don’t hurt Sis!”

Hazuki said that she could help to buy time herself, but Miyo couldn’t actually let her do that.

If Miyo being saved meant letting Hazuki get hurt, if it meant having Takaihito’s residence attacked by this Grotesquerie horde... Then at that point, she’d rather just comply with what the Gifted Communion wanted.

Suddenly, Miyo remembered the three familiars that Kiyoka had handed to her during their New Year’s shrine visit.

At this point, they’re all that’s left.

With her free hand, she activated the familiars inside her kimono, already engraved with arts, and released them.

The tiny pieces of paper sprang to life without a hitch, folded into the shape of a bird and flew at the man.

“Tch! Annoying nonsense!”

The man waved his hand around, trying to fend off the familiars, but they relentlessly attacked his face, repeatedly ramming their bodies into him.

“You stupid scraps! Get out of my way!”

As he shouted in irritation, one of the Grotesqueries jumped up to where Miyo and Hazuki were and clawed at the familiars, shredding them to pieces.

“N-no...”

The remains of the paper constructs fluttered down to the ground.

Kiyoka had crafted the familiars to be effective against humans, but they were powerless in the face of Grotesqueries, which had a unique resistance to both Gifts and arts.

With this, Miyo and Hazuki had exhausted all means of fighting back.

“Too bad.”

The man swung his fist at Hazuki, who landed hard on her backside.

“Stop!”

Miyo couldn't let her get hurt.

She used all of her bodyweight to fall to the ground, pulling the secretary with her. His grip on Miyo's wrist was so tight that he completely lost his balance and stumbled forward.

"You little—!"

The enraged secretary raised his hand up into the air, and the countless Grotesqueries all turned their eyes on him.

It was abundantly clear that he was inciting the Grotesqueries, while trying to unleash his own Gift himself. Miyo used the momentum from her fall to cover Hazuki's body with her own.

"Miyo!"

She ignored Hazuki's desperate protests.

The familiars meant to be her last-ditch resort were all gone.

It didn't seem like Hazuki would be able to dodge the attack or put up a barrier in time. Neither Miyo nor Hazuki had any means of offense between them, so all they could do was hold out like this.

Miyo grit her teeth and shut her eyes with all her might.

However, the impact never came.

In an instant, a heat that melted the chill swept through the air.

She heard the Grotesqueries wail as they expired while the man gave a short, agonized moan.

Miyo timidly opened her eyes and saw that the number of Grotesqueries surrounding them had decreased slightly. The secretary was splayed out miserably along the ground.

The lightning-fast work left her speechless.

"Miyo. Are you all right?"

"Kiyoka...ka?"

Before her eyes, long light brown hair smoothly slid off the top of a shoulder. When she gradually started to grasp the situation, she felt a sharp pain rising in the back of her nose.

He'd come for her. Kiyoka had shown up and protected her.

And that meant Miyo, too, had made it in time.

"Kiyoka...!"

She had thought that this would be the end. She had convinced herself that she might just die here without being able to warn Kiyoka about the danger he faced.

But they were safe. The both of them. Still safe.

"Y-you're late!"

Hazuki lifted herself up and berated Kiyoka in a tearful voice.

Both she and Miyo were unharmed. Kiyoka was also unscathed; he looked down at the groveling secretary.

Miyo scanned the area again and saw that the members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit, along with Kazushi Tatsuishi, were fervently fighting off the myriad Grotesqueries...or at least she

thought they were. Miyo didn't really understand what was going on.

The Grotesqueries are vanishing left and right.

The trick behind it seemed to lie with Kazushi Tatsuishi.

He was fluttering his dazzling *haori* coat as if it were the dancing wings of a butterfly. Then once he trained the fan in his hand on a Grotesquerie, it vanished before Miyo's eyes.

"Hey, Kazushi! Can't you dispel these barriers faster?"

"Could you not ask me to do the impossible? I'm working as frantically as I can here!"

Godou shouted angrily, to which Kazushi responded with a shout of his own. The soldier's usually composed and relaxed demeanor was nowhere to be found.

He and the other members of the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were launching fire, water, wind, and other telekinetic Gifts wherever Kazushi had made the Grotesqueries disappear.

A moment later, she heard the faint cry of dying Grotesqueries.

I don't really know the mechanics behind this, but...

The fight appeared to be completely one-sided. Naturally, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were the superior force, cleanly overwhelming and stamping out the innumerable Grotesqueries.

Miyo returned her eyes to her side.

"Ow! Damn you. Sending me flying at full force like that."

The secretary got up and grumbled. His swift movements clearly weren't those of a pencil-pushing bureaucrat.

But Kiyoka reacted just as quick.

The instant the secretary stood up, Kiyoka slashed at the man with his sheathed saber. The secretary dodged it with light and easy steps as he shot off masses of ice from the palm of his hand.

Kiyoka casually dodged the ice missiles and deflected them while closing in on the secretary.

The entire exchange was barely three seconds long.

What was that...?

It happened in the blink of an eye.

Still, she could tell that the dauntless grin the Gifted Communion follower had been wearing was instantly wiped off his face.

Kiyoka glared daggers at the man and closed in. He jabbed his saber pommel hard into the secretary's chin and used the opening to trip him.

Then Kiyoka pressed his knee into the grounded man's spine, bending his arm back to hold him down.

"Damn you, Kiyoka Kudou...!"

"Don't struggle. If you are not recorded with the state as a Gift-user, then you will be suspected of being with the Gifted Communion," Kiyoka dispassionately informed the secretary before the man gave a

click of his tongue and went silent as he was handcuffed, completely stripped of his freedom.

But then he looked up at Kiyoka with his venomous red eyes and twisted his mouth into a smile.

“Pfft, suspected? You don’t need to tell me that. I am absolutely part of the Gifted Communion. I’m just an ordinary man who was ordered by the Founder to set myself up as one of the minister’s secretaries.”

“Are you saying that the Minister of Education is in league with you?” Kiyoka asked, prompting the man to snort.

“Obviously. The Minister of Education is a collaborator linked to the Founder, and several other Gifted Communion followers and collaborators have infiltrated the government as well.”

“Now that I think about it, the Minister of Education has a relative working in the Ministry of Communications and Transportation.”

“The Founder ordered them to loosen government control on the flow of information. Simple story.”

Had the secretary resigned himself to his fate now that he was captured? The man tamely confessed the secrets he knew, one after another.

Perhaps he was trying to get a lighter punishment in exchange for giving them information. Whatever the case, it wasn’t a bad thing to know the truth.

Finished interrogating the man, Kiyoka called over one of his subordinates and gave them two, then three, orders.

Godou, Kazushi, and the other members were still continuing their fight.

Nevertheless, with the immediate threat passed for the time being, Miyo breathed a sigh of relief together with Hazuki, and they each got back up to their feet.

“Are you two all right?”

They nodded together at Kiyoka, who turned back to them after casting a glance at the secretary.

“Yes, I managed somehow.”

“I’m fine, too.”

“...We weren’t too late this time.”

Kiyoka must have been bothered about not arriving in time just the other day when Miyo had a similar brush with the secretary.

However, her relief was short-lived.

Just then, Miyo remembered why she had summoned Kiyoka and ventured out of Takaihito’s residences without a bodyguard to wait for him.

If she didn’t tell him what she needed to, putting herself in danger to come out here and see him would all be meaningless.

“Kiyoka.”

“What? Actually, you had something urgent to tell me, but what was it about? You couldn’t have possibly foreseen this attack by the Minister of Education’s secretary and got in touch about that.”

According to Kiyoka, he had just finished up a meeting at the advanced guard when he received Hazuki’s notification. Right after, they had sensed the horde of Grotesqueries the secretary had brought with him, so he came rushing over with his men in tow.

Miyo couldn’t tell if the timing of everything had ultimately been good or bad.

She summoned up her courage as her heart threatened to falter in the face of her suspicious fiancé.

“Um, I have something that I have to talk to you about.”

Miyo relayed to Kiyoka the conversation she had inside her dream with Usui in detail.

Normally, she would have been dismissed with a laugh for talking about what she saw in a dream, but Kiyoka understood that the visions Miyo had with Dream Sight were significant.

“I see. So Usui is going after me.”

Usui was targeting Kiyoka to get ahold of Miyo.

The only one surprised by her report was Hazuki; Kiyoka himself didn’t look shaken in the slightest.

“I had predicted that it would come to this eventually. Especially since it’d be convenient for them if I wasn’t around. But what happened just now...is far too crude to have been Usui’s plan for getting rid of me.”

When Kiyoka said the words “what happened just now,” he sharply glanced over at the secretary tied up and lying on his side.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t able to get Usui to tell me how the Gifted Communion is going to go after you.”

Miyo also found it very hard to believe that this was the full extent of the schemes Usui had hinted to her with such confidence.

If only she had conversational skills like Arata’s—then she surely would’ve been able to coax better information out of him.

She lamented her own inadequacy.

“It’s fine. If this is the end of it, then that’s all right with me. Even if it’s not, I’m sure the other side is concocting some elaborate scheme that they think I’ll be unable to answer.”

“Hey, mind if I jump in here?”

Hazuki interrupted them right as there was a lull in the conversation.

“Now that I think about it, where exactly did Arata go? I don’t see him anywhere at all.”

At Hazuki’s casual question, Miyo flinched, and Kiyoka furrowed his brows.

Ultimately, Arata had never shown.

Yurie had gone to call for a guard, and Miyo and Hazuki had requested protection from so many guards and courtiers that Arata would have suspected there was some sort of disturbance if he was indeed in the Imperial Palace grounds. If that had been the case, it was hard to think he wouldn't immediately come running over.

On top of that, there was also the recent disturbance, where Kazushi and Godou had struggled to fight off the horde of Grotesqueries. Arata certainly wouldn't have failed to notice that and come running over to help.

Plus, they were right in the middle of shoring up the security, under Takaihito's direct orders, to begin with.

It was undeniably strange that Arata hadn't shown up.

Kiyoka rubbed his chin, his expression growing stern.

"That's odd. We haven't asked Usuba to do anything on our end, and I don't think he has any business right now that's more important than his bodyguard duties."

The three of them all glanced at one another with dubious looks on their faces.

If that was the case, then where exactly had Arata gone?

No one could answer that question. Amid the silence, small flakes of snow began falling to the ground, one after the other.



"At long last, our time has come. How exciting."

Naoshi Usui glanced at the Minister of Education, holding a whiskey glass as he puffed smoke from a cigar, with deeply felt disgust and contempt.

The military headquarters had secretly fallen into the Gifted Communion's hands.

The lowest ranking soldiers had no idea, of course, but the top level of the General Staff Office had been jailed one by one for not supporting Usui.

Consequently, the officers who had agreed to cooperate with Usui had been working like dogs to fill the holes left behind by incarcerated staff to make it appear like the military was functioning like normal.

Wicked deeds—all carried out by the Gifted Communion at Usui's direction.

However, it wouldn't be long before their actions would be seen as righteous.

It would be a true example of history always being written by the victors. No matter what sort of transgressions he continued to commit,

as long as Usui came out victorious, they would magically become virtuous. That was how the world worked—the victor's ideals were always just.

Usui had obtained military power. He was slowly bending the will of the people to his side, and he held the authority of the emperor as well.

All that was left for him was to then steal this vessel of a country, and Usui's goals would be 70 percent complete.

“Just a little more.”

In his hands were documents signed and sealed by the reigning emperor.

These imperial decrees, which handed down the emperor's will, possessed an unquestionable validity. The preparations had all been made.

Now was his chance.

“Please, feel free to take your time relaxing her, Minister. We'll be beginning things on our end,” Usui said.

“Sure. Make sure you pull it off. My future's resting on your shoulders, too, and all.”

Mysteriously finding amusement in the situation, the minister gave a loud guffaw. It sickened Usui.

This man was nothing but an inferior breed, born without a Gift to his name.

The Minister of Education had jumped at the offer to cooperate with the Gifted Communion once Usui suggested that he would be given an important role in the new government, despite the fact he was Giftless, after they conquered the country.

The minister didn't think that someone should become the ruler of the nation simply because they had inherited the enigmatic supernatural power of Divine Revelation. Put plainly, he wasn't satisfied if he didn't sit on top.

He was overflowing with ambition, so it had been all too easy for Usui to appeal to him.

“Well then, if you'll excuse me.”

When Usui exited the room reserved for hosting distinguished guests in the military headquarters, Houjou, who had been standing in attendance, followed after him.

“As planned, Founder, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit has discovered the mechanism behind the Grotesqueries we created. They're currently arresting the minister's secretary and the Ministry of Communications and Transportation official who caused the latest disturbance.”

“Good work.”

Usui strutted around the halls of the central building of the military

headquarters like he owned the place. No one that passed tried to stop him.

The authority of the abducted reigning emperor, the governmental influence via his collaborators, and the fighting force he had been able to amass from artificial Gift-users—with these factors all lined up together, he could force most of the people and organizations in the country to submit to him.

The path to reach this point had been long.

After the Usuba family had declined, and it was decided Sumi would be wedded into the Saimori family, he had invited her to run away together, but she had turned him down.

If she ran away, then what would happen to her family? He assumed she had asked him that question out of a grim resolve to help her house and her family.

As he'd lamented his own powerlessness, Usui felt loathing for his home, loathing for his people, and loathing for his country.

But when he'd gone on the run after escaping his family, his resentment changed to determination.

Both he and Sumi had a wonderful power in their Gifts, yet they were driven into the shadows. The emperor and his entourage ruined their lives as they saw fit, as if he and Sumi were totally insignificant. That sort of world couldn't have been right. And if it was wrong, then it just needed to be remade.

What did he care about the Usuba code and rules?

He would change things, make Gift-users run the country. If he did, then Gift-users of the Usuba family who were superior to all other Gift-users, like he and Sumi, would be able to live freely, however they saw fit.

Usui had begun to act as soon as these ideals took hold in him.

Moving around the country, gathering people, information, and funds, and secretly establishing a base of operations, he'd put together the facilities to move forward with forbidden research on Gifts and Grotesqueries.

But I lost Sumi during that time.

He'd been so wholly consumed with preparing to overthrow the state that he ended up learning of Sumi's death a few years after it happened.

His subsequent despair had made it all seem worthless to him for a period of time, but when he learned Sumi had a daughter, he roused himself to action once again.

Around the same time, he learned that Miyo was being abused and oppressed within the Saimori household; but this wouldn't matter once he changed the country. In fact, he reckoned that if Miyo was dissatisfied, then she would agree with his way of thinking. The

situation was convenient for him.

But then she met Kiyoka Kudou.

Consequently, she became satisfied with her trite, meaningless peace at his side before she could come to resent the family and house that had made her miserable.

That won't do.

Though Miyo might have been temporarily happy, the plight of Gift-users, of the Usubas, remained the same. Miyo didn't realize that the status quo needed to be changed.

But now, she too would understand that her own thinking was incorrect, and that Usui was truly in the right.

He was finally beginning to make his move to overthrow everything and enact his revenge.

"How is the emperor?"

"He is still very ill, so we're taking care to make sure he doesn't die. Though it's truly the bare minimum."

Houjou's report brought a smile to Usui's face.

Usui would no longer need the former reigning emperor's authority once he took over the country. He had decided to torment the emperor and make him suffer more than he ever had before killing him.

"Do your best to ensure he doesn't die before I take his life."

"As you wish."

Since Miyo had become Kiyoka's fiancée, Usui had been forced to accelerate his preparations. Although he couldn't claim they were good enough when he compared them with his original plans, in the end he would be able push through with a Gift-based feat of strength.

He would create a world for Gift-users, for himself, for the Usubas. This time for sure, he would offer up peace of mind to Sumi and to Miyo.

"Now then. Let's go free our captured brethren."

Usui, with Houjou in tow, left the military command building behind.

Their destination was a special holding facility on the grounds of the headquarters.

The facility had been installed recently and had been made with a mechanism that interfered with Gifts. It was used mainly to hold artificial Gift-users, such as the Gifted Communion's peacekeeping squads.

Passing right by the soldier stationed to guard the entrance, the pair stepped inside the facility, lined with cells processed to block Gift usage.

"Ooh, it's the Founder!"

"The Founder came for us!"

“We can finally get out of here!”

The imprisoned artificial Gift-users shouted with joy as they saw Usui walk down the cell-lined corridor.

He had told them ahead of time that he would be releasing them soon and ordered them to do their best not to resist arrest.

Nevertheless, they must have been lonely being locked up in a cell.

The crowd’s cheers of joy and praise to Usui were almost painful to the ear as they incessantly echoed through the narrow hallway.

Continuing straight down the corridor, Usui and Houjou arrived at an altar deep within the prison.

The altar resembled a plainly made wooden household shrine, fitted with a straw *shimenawa* rope and decorated with holly. This was the object interfering with the Gifts of the people inside.

He couldn’t help think it a rather crude mechanism, but it must have been all the military was capable of, given the hurried construction.

Usui took a dagger out from his breast pocket and unsheathed it.

Then he made a single slash at the altar.

The overly simplistic wooden altar collapsed with disappointing ease, losing its anti-arts effect.

“Houjou, the locks.”

“Yessir.”

With that brief reply, Houjou used the keys he held to quickly unlock each of the cells one by one.

The member of the Gifted Communion peacekeeping squads who had been locked up after the military crackdown exited their cells one after another, voicing their gratitude to Usui along the way.

By supplementing the freed peacekeepers with an innumerable amount of Gift-resistant Grotesqueries, the Gifted Communion would be able to overwhelm the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit with sheer numbers, even if their artificial Gifts were of inferior quality.

Now, even Kiyoka Kudou would no longer be a threat.

“I hope things are going smoothly on their end.”

Usui turned his thoughts to the men he had dispatched in a separate squad.



The sun was setting, the temperature was plummeting, and the snowfall was gradually getting heavier.

Fingers lost more feeling inside pairs of gloves, and white breath continued to faintly appear in the dark sky before disappearing.

Miyo and the others were busy cleaning up after the afternoon’s disturbance in the area surrounding Takaihito’s residence.

Given how many Grotesqueries had appeared, it was possible that some could be hiding in the shadows or blending in somewhere, so they were confirming that all of the creatures were gone as they did some light cleaning of the messy gravel road and garden.

Godou, Kazushi, Hazuki, and everyone in the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit were wrapped up in warm coats, working hard.

Yurie had tired herself out running around to try to find a bodyguard for Miyo, so she was currently tending to things inside.

Takaihito was also safe, and Miyo heard he was on standby inside the palace.

Arata never came back, though.

Arata's whereabouts remained unknown. He had completely disappeared without a trace.

Although they had confirmed that he wasn't within the Imperial Palace grounds, they hadn't been able to discover more than that.

Miyo was worried, but being unable to leave the Imperial Palace, she had no means of searching for him.

Just where did he go...?

He wasn't the type to abandon his duty midway through.

That meant he could have gotten attacked by Usui or gotten wrapped up in some other type of trouble.

With this in mind, Miyo had asked Kiyoka to search for Arata. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure how many people could be spared for the search in this moment of crisis.

I do think Arata should be able to handle most situations just fine, but...

Her worries still remained. But because of that, Miyo had promised to stay by Kiyoka's side and help however she could.

"It's cold out here. You're free to wait inside, you know."

Kiyoka had been urging her indoors every few minutes, but Miyo shook her head.

"I'm fine. I don't want to be the only one holed up in her room all nice and warm."

"I see. Be sure to tell me right away if it gets too hard for you."

"I will," she replied, picking up shrubby branches in the garden.

Though she knew she wasn't providing much help, and it was all for her own self-satisfaction, she didn't want to do nothing.

The uneasiness in her chest still hadn't abated.

Arata had disappeared. Miyo feared that Kiyoka would disappear if she took her eyes off of him for even a few seconds.

There was no way Usui would do anything to Kiyoka.

She wanted to believe that, yet an ill foreboding relentlessly pounded in her chest.

After a brief while, right around when the snow had turned the

ground at their feet pure white, Miyo's fears became reality.

It began with a report that one of the unit members brought to Kiyoka.

"What?"

"I've double-checked it over and over again, but it does seem to be the truth..."

The Minister of Education's secretary they had caught that afternoon, as well as the Minister of Education's relative within the Ministry of Communications and Transport that they had placed into custody under suspicion of treason via said secretary's testimony, and all the Gifted Communion followers and collaborators they had worked to catch were being discharged one by one.

By using the validity of an imperial decree to release them, under the reigning emperor's name.

"Naoshi Usui."

Kiyoka's low snarl seemed to rumble the earth.

"Commander, what are we supposed to do?"

"All we can do is follow Major General Ookaito's orders. Should the major general be in danger, then—"

Their conversation was interrupted.

The sound of countless military boots stomping on gravel reverberated through the area.

A large group of men clad in army uniforms were rushing toward them, completely covering the narrow, tree-lined path that led from the main road through the Imperial Palace to the front door of Takaihito's residence.

There was no moon in the sky, the only illumination coming from the palace lamps and the light bleeding out from within Takaihito's residence.

It seemed as though a mysterious mass of shadow was blanketing the area.

In the blink of an eye, the black crowd coalesced around Miyo and the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members, beginning to surround them.

Kiyoka immediately took Miyo away from the center of the garden and moved her toward Takaihito's residence, stepping out in front of her in protection.

No one had a second to breathe or raise an objection.

Quickly and precisely, the approaching soldiers pointed their unsheathed sabers at everyone surrounded in the garden.

"Wh-what—?"

"Shh. Stay calm and do what they say."

Miyo nodded after being silenced by Kiyoka's whisper.

There were imperial soldiers from outside the Special Anti-

Grotesquerie Unit here, along with people shrouded in black coats who seemed to be members of the Gifted Communion.

Why were these two groups acting together?

With no one able to voice their questions, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit members, including Godou and Kazushi, all raised their hands above their heads to show they wouldn't resist.

It was then—

The person leading the group appeared from the shadows.

Polished leather shoes, a well-tailored suit and overcoat. He had smiled at Miyo countless times before with those fine, sculpted features.

Arata...?

Her missing cousin's—Arata Usuba's—typical agreeable, gentlemanly demeanor was nowhere to be found.

Why?

Nothing about the scene, Arata commanding the military to point their blades at Miyo and company, made sense. Something was happening, something out of the ordinary.

It was strange, wasn't it? Arata shouldn't have been over there with them.

More importantly, what were these soldiers doing?

Not understanding what was going on, Miyo could only stand there, not in fear but in sheer bewilderment.

“Commander Kudou. How very unfortunate,” Arata said.

Kiyoka responded to Arata's cold words with furrowed brows.

“What is this? What the hell are you doing, Usuba?”

“You are under suspicion of causing bodily harm to several individuals as well as planning to abduct the emperor and subvert the state.”

“What did you say?”

It was as though they had been hit with a bolt of lightning.

Everyone doubted their ears, unable to hide their surprise.

“On top of that, you unjustly restrained the Minister of Education's secretary earlier this afternoon, didn't you? That'll be included in your list of crimes.”

“Unjustly? We were simply carrying out our mission. The secretary attacked a civilian under governmental protection and smuggled a Grotesquerie horde into the Imperial Palace grounds on top of that. Of course we captured him.”

Kiyoka replied just as calmly to Arata's dispassionate declaration of his false crimes. However, Miyo and the others could clearly see that neither of them was giving an ear to anything the other said.

Sighing loudly and taking out his favorite pistol from his coat pocket, Arata slowly aimed its barrel at Kiyoka.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Please cooperate and let us tie you up, Commander Kudou. You’re a prime suspect in this case.”

Miyo couldn’t comprehend anything Arata was saying.

First of all, she couldn’t understand why Arata was denouncing Kiyoka and coming to arrest him as if he was an officer of the law. He was an ordinary citizen, not even a government official, so he was acting more unjustifiable at the moment.

Yet here he was, commanding the military to point their blades at Miyo and the others.

Why... We—we didn’t...

Having blades thrust in their direction meant that Kiyoka, that Miyo and the others, had committed some sort of crime. It also meant that to the army, they had become an enemy to take precautions against.

“Th-that’s, that can’t be...!”

Miyo couldn’t help leaning forward to try arguing back.

This was all a mistake. Kiyoka hadn’t caused any violent incidents, nor had he abducted the emperor. He hadn’t even taken part in anything like it. It was the Gifted Communion who had made off with the emperor in the first place, and certainly not Kiyoka.

It was all nonsense. False charges.

“Miyo.”

Yet who but Kiyoka himself quietly bade Miyo to stop.

“The emperor is cooperating with the Gifted Communion and has already been placed in the protective custody of the military. His Majesty himself has accused you of being involved and had ordered you be detained immediately. Furthermore, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit’s temporary camp and station have already been brought under control. Make any wrong moves, and they will all be shot on the spot.”

Arata kept his arm up, gun trained on Kiyoka as he walked toward him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry. Evidence has been brought forward, so if you try to escape, you’ll be publicly wanted for the serious crime of rebellion. There won’t be anywhere left in the Empire for you to run. Though I suppose you’ll be executed eventually even if you do cooperate.”

Arata’s eyes were cold as ice, devoid of the slightest hint of emotion.

The soldiers in the area didn’t budge an inch, making no move to sheathe their swords, while one person, looking like part of the peacekeeping squads, walked forward and raised the warrant containing the imperial decree up high.

“Kiyoka Kudou is a heinous criminal who has harmed the emperor himself. Arrest him immediately!”

At the same moment Arata raised his voice and gave the order, several of the soldiers approached Kiyoka and slipped handcuffs over his wrists.

Though Kiyoka could have easily resisted, he refrained from fighting back, going along with everything from start to finish.

“So you’re on their side, are you, Usuba?”

His tone was strained, loaded with tension—yet it held a sense of understanding and resignation, as well.

Arata neither confirmed nor denied the accusation.

Kiyoka must not have resisted so that Miyo and the others would be spared. She understood that, painfully so.

If he planned to escape from here, then that would ensure that as relatives of such a criminal, Miyo, Hazuki, and anyone else with connections to the Kudou family could no longer guarantee their safety.

“Arata!”

Betting on the slightest sliver of hope, Miyo called to her cousin.

However, pierced by the coldhearted glimmer in his eyes, she trembled, daunted.

“Please be quiet, Miyo.”

“I—I can’t do that!”

The cousin who had been so kind to her, who she loved as family, was terrifying.

It was almost as if he had become someone else entirely, wholly intimidating, and she hesitated to even honestly meet him face-to-face, as she had up until now.

“Don’t make me angry, Miyo. You know just as well yourself. About what the Founder is thinking.”

Why was the word *Founder* coming out of Arata’s lips? Why, why, why?

Hadn’t he been so resentful of Usui’s deeds before? Lamenting that he was trying so hard to revive the Usuba family and Usui’s actions were holding him back? After all of that, then...

“Wh-why?”

Her parched mouth made her voice hoarse.

Suddenly, Arata averted his eyes, and his features sunk into a dark, muddled gloom.

“It will benefit the Usuba family. Even I know it’s quite the simple-minded reason, but that is why I decided to help Usui.”

“Y-you betrayed us...?”

“There’s nothing more to be discussed here. Kiyoka Kudou, we’re bringing you in.”

Arata ruthlessly shut down Miyo’s timid questioning.

Was this really the same cousin she knew?

She was left speechless by his fierce rejection.

Miyo wasn't convinced at all by such a nonsensical pretense that this would benefit the Usubas. Usui was a person who had continued to live his life by breaking every code the Usubas stood by. Could Arata, having suffered all this time, and who was still bound and struggling under his familial heritage even now, accept such a man?

Was the responsibility that he had been burdened with his whole life really so insignificant to him?

"Arata!"

Despite Miyo's shriek, Arata didn't stop. The soldiers didn't even look at her.

"...Usuba, do you mind?"

Right before Kiyoka was to be taken away by the soldiers, his hands bound, he signaled to Arata with a look.

"Well, why not?"

Arata seemed to pick up on this and stopped the soldiers.

Then Kiyoka escaped from the circle of troops and came over to Miyo.

A cold wind blew. The icy chill, howling through the area, kicked up the snow that beat against her cheek.

"Miyo."

He called her name with more warmth and softness than ever before, such that it seemed to melt the snow around her.

The handsome face she looked up at wore such a gentle and peaceful smile, he looked nothing like a man just charged with a crime and essentially being led off to his death.

"Allow me to tell you something. So I won't have any regrets."

She didn't want to hear it.

If she did, she was sure it would all come to an end.

She'd no longer be able to return to those days she spent filled with kindness.

Miyo didn't want to be separated. She didn't want to lose him. Yet she was utterly helpless, only able to stand there and watch.

Her eyes filled with tears. She could barely see the face of the person she adored through her wet, blurred vision.

"No. I don't want to hear it. So please, don't go."

She jumped into Kiyoka's chest, desperately clinging fast to him. Her tears welled over one after the other, ceaselessly.

Kiyoka lightly wriggled his fingers about in annoyance at his hands being bound, before he crouched down.

Then, in her ear, he left a single whisper.

"I love you."

“...A-ah.”

The words of love fell gently and disappeared like stardust.

He patted a tuft of Miyo's hair with his hand, conveying his warmth to her, and then separated.

“I should have told you sooner. And whatever your feelings for me may be, my heart won't change.”

Kiyoka turned around, not allowing himself to feel any lingering reluctance to part from her.

His hair, tied together with a purple cord, swayed in the dim darkness of night, beneath heavy clouds that blocked the moonlight.

The strength in her legs giving out, she sunk down to the freezing white carpet below her.

“But, Miyo. Please, let me be a bit selfish... I want you to keep waiting. Until I return. Wait in that house for me.”

She was unable to see Kiyoka's expression as he gave his parting words.

His familiar form gradually grew farther and farther away.

Oh, why?

She had known, hadn't she? Known what Usui was scheming. That he would be coming after Kiyoka.

Yet she had been satisfied just warning him about the danger, pleased that it seemed like things had been resolved for the time being.

She had had the time. Several hours, more than enough. And despite it all, what exactly had Miyo done?

She had basked in self-satisfaction, merely pretending as though she had done her part, as if she was trying to accomplish something, despite not actually doing anything at all.

Meanwhile, in these few hours, Usui had made his move and captured Kiyoka just like that.

I've been such a fool.

She had convinced herself that she couldn't have done anything to save him because she was being protected. She could use neither arts nor her Gift, and she had been slow to start learning about them. There was nothing to be done, and she didn't have any other options.

Miyo had only herself to blame for coming up with those excuses, for neglecting to act.

She had tried to convince herself that Kiyoka was strong and that he would be all right. Even though Usui had told her otherwise.

She should have known.

In this world, you couldn't take anything for granted. Unfairness and irrationality were everywhere, and if she didn't resist, nothing would change.

I might not ever be able to see Kiyoka again. And it's all my fault.

She no longer had any way to answer the love he had given her.

In truth, she had long realized her own feelings, and yet she hadn't conveyed them to him when she could've. Instead, she had simply run away from them.

That, too, was entirely Miyo's fault.

The inside of her head felt like it was filling with snow, losing its heat and going stark white.

"Sniff... Waaugh..."

Miyo covered her face with both hands and wailed.

EPILOGUE

Fragile white flower petals floated down from the clouded sky.

The ground was covered in a layer of cold, immaculate white, and the people found it almost impossible to walk through the snow, which was clinging heavily to their feet with each step.

The season Takaihito had forewarned as dangerous, with snow stretching pure white in all directions, had arrived.

Miyo breathed into her numb hands to warm them.

She wore a finely patterned pale orange kimono with red and white Japanese plums scattered across it plus *hakama* pants, so she could move around more easily. Similarly, she had swapped out her sandals for dark brown laced leather shoes for increased mobility and protection from the cold.

Once she had wrapped her hair up in the white lace ribbon that her future mother-in-law, Fuyu Kudou, had previously entrusted her with and finished applying light makeup to her face, nothing but face powder and lipstick, she was finished getting dressed.

It was still dark in the early winter morning. Miyo turned around as she stood in the front entryway and found that a light layer of snow had blown inside the Kudou family's main estate.

I left a note behind in my room, so...it should be all right.

It had been four days since Kiyoka was arrested.

From there, practically everything changed.

First, Miyo, Hazuki, and Yurie left Takaihito's residence and started staying in the Kudou main estate instead.

Takaihito had tried to stop them, insisting that it was still dangerous. However, since Usui's target had been Kiyoka, and he successfully captured him, it was unlikely he'd go after Miyo directly anymore.

In addition, there was the experience she had right before the secretary's attack on her, where no one within Takaihito's residence

had provided her with protection.

It was revealed to be an act of rebellion from the Minister of the Imperial Household, who harbored ill will toward Takaihito's hardheaded attitude, and she had received an unofficial apology from the minister.

However, that was more than enough reason to be distrustful of the residence's guards.

Kiyoka was hauled away, and the danger to Takaihito's own life was drawing near. Entry in and out of the Imperial Palace became even more regulated than it had been before, and as a rule, outsiders were forbidden from entering entirely.

At this point, Takaihito and the Minister of the Imperial Household couldn't spare any consideration for Miyo and her two attendants.

That was why she thought it was the correct call to leave the Imperial Palace.

And then...

The peacekeeping squads and artificial Gift-users that the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit had been diligently capturing since the end of the previous year were all freed at the hands of Usui.

The allies of the Gifted Communion were acquitted of any crimes, and conversely, those that defied them were being restrained one after another.

Justice in the Empire had completely turned on its head.

The city and scenery haven't changed in the slightest, and yet...

After she looked out over the imperial capital, blanketed white, from behind the fence encircling the Kudou estate, she returned her gaze back in front of her.

It was the fourth day since Kiyoka had been taken into custody.

The first day, she'd been unable to get a handle on anything, spending the entire day in a stupor. The second day, she left Takaihito's residence and imposed on the Kudou main estate. Then on the third day, she'd made up her mind while holing up inside her room.

I'm going to go get Kiyoka.

Kiyoka said he wanted her to wait for him in the home they shared. That it was the only selfish request he had for her.

But Miyo was going against his instructions.

The Gifted Communion is probably waiting for me. Why else would they have captured Kiyoka? That's why I'm going to go along with their invitation on purpose and reunite with him.

Kiyoka was captured, and Arata had betrayed them. Since there was a chance they had assisted Kiyoka in his crimes, the Special Anti-Grotesquerie Unit and Kazushi were under strict observation by Usui's men, a mix of peacekeeping squads and soldiers, and none of them

were able to move about freely.

Miyo still couldn't get in touch with Ookaito either, who was looking into the Usui collaborators inside the government.

Every last person was busy doing everything they could for themselves. Miyo couldn't be the only one to keep relying on others.

She knew the dangers very well.

Nevertheless, this was the one time where she couldn't wait around aimlessly.

Miyo was the one Usui was waiting for, and everything happened according to his motives.

What had happened up until now was a mistake. Miyo needed to settle things herself, so she couldn't continue leaving it all up to others.

If she didn't act, she'd regret it. A lesson she had learned all too well.

The protective charms Kiyoka had given her were carefully tucked away inside her kimono. For Miyo, they were a means of self-defense.

"...Forgive me, Sis."

She left without saying anything to Hazuki because she knew that Hazuki would want to come with her.

But Miyo couldn't get her involved any further. She needed someone to wait for her in the Kudou estate. Plus, Hazuki had Asahi to look after.

When she considered the truly worse-case scenario, and the possibility that Asahi might lose his mother, she really couldn't ask her for help.

Going up against the Gifted Communion, there were no guarantees of survival.

With that level of resolve, Miyo set out.

I'm sure I'll be coming back with Kiyoka, safe and sound. When that happens, it'll be such a relief to see Sis's smiling face. For Kiyoka, too.

When she returned, she hoped that Hazuki or Yurie would be there to greet them... Though she might get reprimanded for acting so selfishly. But she didn't mind if she had to sit through an earful first.

"I will come back. No matter what," she declared to the empty entryway with the best smile she could muster.

Miyo wouldn't back down on her vow. She would return, bringing Kiyoka with her.

"I'm off."

Miyo turned around and walked on alone.

That moment, when she had watched from behind as Kiyoka was hauled away, she had felt more remorse than at any other point in her life.

Somewhere in her heart, she had held such naïve thoughts, that if

they had managed to safely withstand things for the time being, then it would all work out at some point, and they could return to their peaceful daily lives.

I was truly such a fool.

What had she been thinking—that as long as she could return to her warm daily life, it would be enough?

Despite knowing full well, if she didn't make her feelings known, she would probably regret it for the rest of her life.

"I'm not going to waver anymore."

The crunching of the snow grounded Miyo as she walked ahead, steeling her heart against hesitation and carelessness.

She chided herself not to grow timid.

Miyo had realized it for a while—she needed to return these feelings she held for Kiyoka to him.

She hadn't understood the importance of expressing herself to others while she had been able to. The realization came far too late.

But she could still make it in time.

She stared straight ahead down the wintry city street, packed with houses on either side.

Miyo devotedly continued forward, without ever looking back.

 AFTERWORD

I've kept you waiting for quite a while, everyone. It's good to see you again.

This is Akumi Agitogi. I've been getting a lot more questions about where my pen name comes from lately, and I don't really know how to respond to them. I'm starting to regret the fact I picked such a bizarre pen name at all!

The narrative has made it all the way to Volume 5, and the ending of the (tentatively named) Usui Arc that began in Volume 3 is in sight.

When I first started writing this series, I honestly thought, *Well, if I can finish telling the story of the initial betrothal in Volume 1 and the Usuba family story in Volume 2, I'll be satisfied.* But in the blink of an eye, we've already reached Volume 5. Although I'm beginning to feel like the title of this series is turning into a bait and switch, I'm relieved that what lies ahead is finally coming into view.

That, along with everything else, is all thanks to everyone who has continued to support *My Happy Marriage*. I've received so many fan letters, and they encourage me to keep going. Thank you.

This volume sees the continuation of Miyo's, Kiyoka's, and the other characters' trials and tribulations, which is quite the far cry from showing their peaceful daily lives, but I'm always hoping that I'll be able to write a more heartwarming love story, a fantastical tale of husband and wife. I want Miyo and Kiyoka to experience a much, much more unremarkable happiness... That being said, please keep all the comments about how the actual story of the books is the complete opposite of the title to yourselves...

I'm very thankful to see that Rito Kousaka's manga adaptation is kicking into high gear, too! I ask anyone who hasn't read it yet to please, *please*, check it out in Square Enix's Gangan ONLINE. It's precious and adorable!

While this is always the case, I have caused a great deal of stress and trouble to many people in the process of finishing this book, particularly to my managing editor. I've safely scraped by and made it to the afterword. Thank you very much.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude and thanks to Tsukiho Tsukioka, who returned to draw the cover illustration. I was deeply moved by your piece, and I felt so glad to have written the story this far, just so I could witness such an ephemeral and beautiful cover.

Finally, to all of you who have read each word of this book down to this very afterword: thank you very much for enjoying the world of *My Happy Marriage* with me. I hope Volume 5 was a delight as well.

Until we meet again.

Akumi Agitogi

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by Yen On.**

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